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THE RING

PERFECT STORM

NAOYA INOUE VS. JUNTO NAKATANI IS WITHIN REACH

ALSO: MAX KELLERMAN RETURNS
OPETAIA DEMANDS UNIFICATION FIGHTS
REVISITING ROBINSON-OLSON III

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The Ring Magazine - The Bible of Boxing, December 2025 • Volume 102, No. 13

Naoki Fukuda

A perfect straight right meets perfect timing in Naoki Fukuda's photograph from Jorge Linares' victory over Al Toyogon in 2019.

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BOOTS ON

Philly switch-hitter Jaron “Boots” Ennis made an eye-popping debut at junior middleweight by smashing Uisma Lima inside two minutes of action at the Xfinity Mobile Arena on October 11. The former Ring Magazine welterweight champ decked the Angolan twice before closing out with a frenzied two-fisted assault that forced the referee to call a halt at 1:58 of the opening round. Ennis improved to 35-0 (31 KOs) and is now targeting the 154-pound division’s elite.

Matthew Heasley

Riyadh Season Levels Up: Elite Boxing, Global Entertainment, and stc's Seamless Connectivity

Over the past few years, Saudi Arabia has captured the world's attention by hosting some of the biggest boxing showdowns in the industry, branding the Kingdom as the destination of choice for live sports enthusiasts. The growing number of sports arenas, games, and matches are all part of Riyadh Season, a lineup of entertainment, culture, and sporting events held in the nation's capital from October to March every year.

This year, the Riyadh Season is levelling up its boxing lineup. Now in its sixth edition, the festival has an expanded lineup of elite boxing events, international tournaments, and live fan experiences, building on the increased demand for legendary boxing events from tourists visiting Saudi from across the globe.

After welcoming more than 18 million visitors in 2024, Riyadh Season is building its boxing and entertainment roster, which means the city's digital infrastructure must go above and beyond to keep up. Behind the flashing lights, entertaining shows, and intense combat lies stc group's unparalleled digital infrastructure. As the event's official premium partner for the next two years, stc is ready to meet the unique demands that come from the convergence of entertainment and technology in one of the most digitally literate cities in the world.

A Season of Firsts

After five years of hosting the Riyadh Season, the organizers of the Kingdom's leading entertainment event have ramped up the events list for the 2025 season. Well-known for its boxing and sports line-up each year, combat sports enthusiasts are set for six months of action-packed events across the city.

As part of its growing influence in global sports, Riyadh Season will host phase two of the WBC Boxing Grand Prix, an ambitious, multi-phase international tournament involving 128 fighters from over 40 countries. Organized by the World Boxing Council, the series promises to deliver months of drama and high-stakes matchups across multiple weight classes, all culminating in a global showdown to crown a new world champion under the Riyadh lights at Boulevard World.

Adding to the fight calendar, Riyadh Season will be hosting the WWE Royal Rumble and SmackDown. This will mark the first time that the legendary wrestling spectacle comes to Riyadh for the first time outside of the US and Canada. Fans of combat sports are sure to get their fix at Riyadh Season, as it brings renowned competitions to the Middle East in a world first.

This year, Riyadh Season has also partnered with Matchroom Sport, one of the world's most respected sports promoters. The deal expands Riyadh's reach into boxing, darts, and snooker, ensuring a steady stream of marquee events featuring global stars and championship titles that are sure to catch the attention of any boxing fan.

Beyond the array of sports championships that will headline at Riyadh Season, the revamped site of the six-month festival is setting another knock-out punch. The Riyadh Season site has expanded to host three new cultures in addition to their array of international pavilions at the site. In addition to these new cultural experiences, this year's Riyadh Season has introduced the Beast Arena in partnership with YouTuber Mr Beast, offering immersive experiences, themed zones, and high-energy competitions to bring a whole new level of entertainment to all visitors.

Behind the roar of the crowd, stc group is delivering the invisible force that makes the Riyadh Season experience possible: world-class connectivity.

The Seamless Soul of Riyadh Season: stc group

stc's high-performance 5G network is the backbone of the entire event ecosystem, empowering fans, media, and athletes alike to stay connected in real time. Whether it's streaming highlight reels, posting ringside moments, or transmitting live data for broadcasters, stc's digital infrastructure ensures that every interaction happens at lightening speeds.

Ahead of the 2025 boxing lineup, stc has expanded its coverage across 14 key Riyadh Season locations, deploying 45 fixed and mobile towers in outdoor venues, and 25 indoor towers to guarantee full-strength signals inside arenas. Over 2,500 antennas and numerous high-speed Wi-Fi hotspots have been strategically placed to maintain seamless connectivity even during peak event traffic. The result: zero lag, zero downtime, and millions of global fans experiencing every second of the action as if they were in the front row.

Riyadh Season is more than just 6 months of action-packed fun. It's a glimpse into the future of global entertainment. With its expanded venues and jaw-dropping list of guests, it represents a fusion of innovation, technology, and ambition.

It's no doubt that this year's Riyadh Season has been set out to be a huge success. And making sure that the action, immersion, and drama of each step of the way is captured seamlessly, is stc group.

Jeddah
غـــيـــر

Jeddad Knows Age
Every Moment Matters Here

Jeddah is Different

Harry How

COME OUT WRITING

INOUE VS. NAKATANI

We asked readers to look beyond Ring V and offer their thoughts on a potential Naoya Inoue vs. Junto Nakatani matchup:

Naoya Inoue vs. Junto Nakatani is the best fight to be made in boxing, at least from an avid boxing fan's perspective. These two have been on a collision course for years – first rumors, then speculation and now open discussion from both camps and both fighters. As for how it plays out, well, as indestructible as Naoya Inoue is, I believe Junto Nakatani is the sole fighter in this world to have what it takes to beat Inoue, and I think he will beat him. Nakatani is, to me, the perfect mix of power, precision, movement, counterattacking and defensive responsibility.

Having been in the gym with Junto, watching him train for many years, interviewing him and being around him and his camp, there's something unique about Junto. From the first day I met him and watched him train, he reminded me of an old-school fighter, a fighter that makes boxing look effortless with a calm, tactical and composed demeanor, that not only has raw boxing gifts but the heart and mind of a true champion.

The timing is perfect for this fight as well. Junto is at the right moment in his career; he's had the decisive wins and unforgettable KOs; he has the reputable names on his resume and the accolades at such a young age to back it up. Junto deserves this fight, and Inoue deserves to give it to him. This fight is a win for both men. Whatever happens in this fight, I expect a war. I expect a fight that will go down in history as one of the all-time great fights, and I plan on being there in Japan when it happens.

Sebastian Milo, The Boxing Mob

Nakatani definitely has the tools to trouble Inoue. His length and southpaw stance will pose real problems. Inoue's been dropped before from that same side where his right hand dips. When hurt, he tends to get overly aggressive, which could open him up again. Nakatani must stay composed during those moments and not get drawn into exchanges. Ultimately, Inoue's experience and power at this weight can't be understated. I see both hitting the canvas, but Inoue's poise, ring IQ and experience ultimately earn him a unanimous decision. Bigger threat: Rafael Espinoza!!

Alex Villagran

Every Hall of Fame fighter has that one bout that cements their legacy – from Ali vs. Frazier to Floyd vs. Pacquiao. But we still haven't seen that from Inoue. He will get his chance against Nakatani in what could be Japan's biggest fight ever.

Leon Barchue

I think that Nakatani will be a problem for Inoue because of Nakatani's long-range shot selections, southpaw stance, power and ring IQ. Inoue is also known to have an opening to his chin with a left hook in the southpaw vs. orthodox position. Can Nakatani outbox Inoue all 12 rounds, or can Inoue get inside and land his shots? I think it will be a true 50/50 fight.

Gie-Jay Paguio

Naoya Inoue's fundamentals are stupendous. His ability to make the basics look like art is truly a step above the rest in today's era. Then we've got Junto Nakatani, a long-range sniper with dynamite in his left hand. He brings the dangerous

accuracy with a touch of monstrous chaos. His angles and his deadly, piercing uppercuts could pose a serious threat to The Monster.

Zinedine Ziddaine

A potential showdown between Naoya Inoue and Junto Nakatani isn't just another big fight. It's a cultural moment that boxing needs. It's the type of matchup that reminds us why we fell in love with the sport in the first place: two pound-for-pound stars fighting to see who is truly the best, exactly what the echoes of boxing have always been about.

What makes this even more special is that both men are pound-for-pound greats from the same nation. We've never seen anything like it. This would without a shadow of a doubt be the greatest fight in Japanese boxing history, the kind historians will look back on a hundred years from now. Both fighters are at the peak of their powers, daring to prove who truly reigns supreme.

Jo Aujla

BOOTS

Jaron "Boots" Ennis, according to Eddie Hearn of Matchroom Boxing, is destined to become boxing's next pound-for-pound star. Uisma Lima was a sacrificial lamb, yes, but Ennis made a statement by dismantling him in one scintillating round. Beating Lima doesn't make Ennis the best fighter on the planet, as Hearn boldly claimed, but it does mark the beginning of a new chapter. The beltholders at junior middleweight have been put on notice, and so has Terence Crawford. Is Ennis good? Yes. Very good? Absolutely. Pound-for-pound? Not yet. He's laced up for greatness, now let's see how the boots wear.

Alex Springer

I believe Ennis is the real deal, but I also respect the way Eddie Hearn moves his fighters. He is gonna put them in with tough competition eventually. We can't say nothing about that, so let Eddie build his fighter. They said Vergil Ortiz is next, and it's a great fight. Let's also remember Boots at 147 had to overpay Stanionis to even get that unification fight. Jaron took a pay cut. And let's stop saying that he ain't fought nobody – well, when he was at 147, the top champs were Brian Norman Jr., Mario Barrios, Stanionis and Jaron himself, so he can only fight the names in his division that wanted to fight. And let's kill the Jaron vs. Crawford talk. It's like when Floyd Mayweather was on his way out: Floyd wasn't gonna fight Keith Thurman or Errol Spence – they coming up and Floyd was on his way out. Same as Bud vs. Boots. Ya know Ennis is on his come-up and Bud is on his way out, so only big fights for Bud at this point of his career. We have to think logical, which I know boxing fans don't do.

Jeremy Jones

Ennis is accustomed to this kind of view.

When I watch Jaron "Boots" Ennis, it's not just his power that hits me; it's how he thinks in there. His timing's cold, his setups feel calculated, like he's already three moves ahead. I wouldn't say he's at his absolute peak yet, but he's close. Moving up to 154 will test him for real, though I still think he can hang or maybe even run that division once he adjusts to the bigger bodies.

Julian Marley Resabal

★★★★

RESPECT THE ROOTS

Lately, boxing's been walking a thin line between sport and spectacle. Don't get me wrong; I respect marketing, I get the showbiz side. But when fighters like Jake Paul get more attention than real champions grinding for years, something feels off. We just watched Crawford and Canelo remind the world what true greatness looks like – legacy, precision and heart. That's boxing. But now we got exhibition fights trending more than title bouts. The fans want both excitement and authenticity, not TikTok clout in gloves. The sport's future depends on fighters who risk everything, not influencers chasing views. Let's keep the energy high, the lights bright but never forget, this game was built on blood, pride, and warriors, not algorithms.

Raian Otero

MIKE MCCALLUM

Thank you to The Ring for the article on the late, great Mike McCallum (September 2025). "The Bodysnatcher" was one of the best fighters of his era. May he rest in peace. Because he was so talented, he was among the most avoided (although I don't believe Marvelous Marvin Hagler ducked anyone). McCallum's biggest career mistake was joining the Kronk boxing team, turning many potential opponents into sparring partners. It wasn't until he left the Kronk gym and went to the Duvas that McCallum got fights with ex-stablemates David Braxton and Milton McCrory. In McCallum's greatest career victory, his KO of Donald Curry, he once again came from behind to launch that titanic, tremendous hook. In honor of Mike McCallum, The Ring should have a Mythical Matchup of The Bodysnatcher vs. Hitman Hearns.

Wise E. Gardner II

Write To The Ring!

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Richard Pelham

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RINGSIDE By Doug Fischer

ACCOUNTABILITY

Jaime Munguia hasn't seen many negative consequences for his positive test results.

Bruno Surace's Cinderella story only lasted six months. Not because of what happened in his rematch with Jaime Munguia, but because of what happened afterwards with Munguia's drug testing and the way the results were handled.

Surace, who earned The Ring's 2024 Upset of the Year award for his sixth-round KO of Munguia last December, dropped a 12-round unanimous decision to Munguia in their immediate rematch on the Canelo Alvarez-William Scull undercard in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on May 3. Later in the month, it was revealed that a Munguia urine sample taken by the Voluntary Anti-Doping Association (VADA) the day after the fight returned an adverse finding for exogenous testosterone.

If you're not familiar with the word "exogenous," it means the testosterone was administered into the body via injection, pills, patches, gels, etc., and you don't have to be an anti-doping expert to know that adding that hormone to an athlete's body acts as a performance enhancer. Doing so increases muscle mass, strength, energy levels and red blood cell counts, which aids stamina.

It should come as no surprise that exogenous testosterone is prohibited by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), which classifies the synthetic hormone and its metabolites as banned substances under category S1, anabolic agents. Substances under this category are banned for athletes both in and out of competition.

In a just world, Munguia would have taken full responsibility for what was in his system – even if he maintained his innocence. He, his team and the boxing organizations regulating the May 3 event would recognize that Surace had been wronged. Munguia would be punished – fined a significant portion of his purse and suspended for at least a year – and the official result of the rematch would be changed to a no contest.

However, we do not live in a just

world, and boxing is often an ugly reminder of that.

Munguia denied any wrongdoing – of course – and asked for his B-sample to be tested in hopes that the adverse finding was a false positive. When that sample also tested positive, Munguia's management team did what most managers do in this situation – they "lawyered up" by retaining the services of Global Sports Advocates, a law firm that represents world-class athletes and proudly specializes in anti-doping violations.

Team Munguia soon claimed the adverse finding was the result of contamination and sent 74 items to the Sports Medicine Research and Testing Laboratory (SMRTL) in Utah – the WADA-accredited lab where all VADA-collected samples are tested. These items that Munguia had supposedly ingested or come into contact with included supplements, creams, lotions, medicines, foods and even hotel shampoos. According to Global Sports Advocates, four of these items were contaminated with pregnenolone, a naturally occurring steroid that is essential in the body's production of other steroid hormones, including testosterone.

Pregnenolone, which is not a banned substance, would be Munguia's "Get Out of Jail Free" card. The British Boxing Board of Control (BBBofC) – which is the regulating authority for all Saudi Arabian events – passed this information over to UK Anti-Doping (UKAD), which fully accepted the excuse of contamination.

And just like that, the BBBofC announced in September that Munguia was cleared of any wrongdoing. The unanimous decision remains on the fighters' records and Munguia is free to return to the ring again as soon as a fight can be made. UKAD reportedly gave him a warning.

The WBC embraced the BBBofC's decision to clear Munguia as well as studies brought forth by Global Sports Advocates that claimed pregnenolone could produce false positives in doping tests. So, Munguia remains in the WBC super middleweight rankings (at No. 3) while Surace is unrated by the Mexico-based sanctioning organization.

It should be pointed out that the WBC did not have a title on the line in the Munguia-Surace rematch, so one might wonder why they would need to chime in on the BBBofC's and UKAD's decisions, but it's obvious that they want to be in the Munguia business as well as the good graces of his promoter, Fernando Beltran, and his trainer, Eddy Reynoso – both of whom carry a lot of influence in Mexico.

Surace gave a solid effort but was unable to reproduce the magic of the first fight against Munguia.

Munguia released an official statement on his supposed exoneration in early September:

"I want to thank the WBC for reviewing the complete scientific evidence and confirming there will be no investigation, charge or sanction. I did not cheat – the science proves it – and I am grateful to the WBC, BBBofC and UKAD for acknowledging this truth."

There are two problems with how this case was resolved:

1. Science did NOT prove the adverse finding was caused by contamination. The metabolites in Munguia's system were the result of EXOGENOUS testosterone, not endogenous or naturally occurring hormones, such as pregnenolone. According to anti-doping expert Dr. Daniel Eichner, president of the SMRTL, "The positive test for [Munguia's] sample was based on the measurement of metabolites of testosterone-related steroids, **which are unrelated to pregnenolone. Exposure to pregnenolone does not affect these targets.** Use of pregnenolone alone does not result in a positive IRMS (Isotope Ratio Mass Spectrometry) test." And just to be clear that this doesn't just apply to pregnenolone: The purpose of IRMS testing is to identify exogenous testosterone use.

2. Even if the adverse finding was due to contamination, Munguia competed with the presence of added testosterone, which is generally accepted as giving a performance-enhancing edge, and he should be held responsible.

Strict liability – the legal concept that offenders should be held accountable for their actions and damages regardless of fault, negligence or intent – should apply to any abnormally dangerous activity, but especially so when performance-enhancing substances are used in professional boxing where the combatants run the risk of being seriously injured or killed.

Sadly, in this case, boxing's governing bodies were too busy protecting the well-connected fighter to seriously consider Munguia's accountability or how those 12 rounds and the subsequent loss will impact Surace's future health and career. The real victim was cast aside to clear the way for Munguia to get back in the ring before the end of the year and move on to a big fight in 2026.

As usual, it's business before sport in boxing.

If it's any consolation to Surace, The

Ring's rankings are about the sport, not the business. In July, The Ring Ratings Panel unanimously voted to remove Munguia from the super middleweight rankings and to reinstate Surace to his placement before their rematch. Surace remains in the rankings, currently at No. 8, as this issue goes to press. Munguia remains out, and he's not coming back in until he fights a credible opponent without testing positive for PEDs.

The Ratings Panel takes a practical stance on such matters, and the bottom line is that Munguia-Surace II was tainted. We don't have the authority to overturn results, but we're not going to rank boxers who competed with PEDs in their systems.

This isn't the first time the Ratings Panel has dropped fighters who tested positive for PEDs while the WBC ruled that the same fighters would keep their world titles and remain in their rankings.

Luis Nery was stripped of the Ring bantamweight championship after he tested positive for the banned substance zilpaterol following his Ring/WBC title-winning stoppage of Shinsuke Yamanaka in 2017. The WBC allowed Nery to keep their title until he lost it on the scales prior to his 2018 rematch with Yamanaka.

Surace was reinstated in The Ring's ratings – Munguia was dropped.

The Ring dropped Oscar Valdez from the junior lightweight rankings after he tested positive for the banned substance phentermine the week of his WBC title defense against Robson Conceicao in 2021. The local commission (Pascua Yaqui Tribe outside of Tucson, Arizona) allowed the fight to proceed, and the WBC allowed Valdez to keep his belt.

And most recently, Francisco Rodriguez Jr. was dropped from The Ring's flyweight rankings due to testing positive for the banned substance heptaminol after his punishing 12-round decision over Galal Yafai in June. Despite Rodriguez also failing a drug test after an eight-round bout in Texas last December, he remains in the WBC's flyweight rankings at No. 2 at the time of this writing. The Ring reinstated Yafai in the 112-pound rankings, where he is currently No. 5.

Both Munguia and Valdez were trained by Reynoso at the time of their positive PED tests, a fact that did not escape scrutiny from the boxing public. Team Munguia released this statement on that speculation during the investigation:

"We want to clarify that Eddy Reynoso serves only as Jaime's trainer. He is not involved in Jaime's nutrition, supplementation or medical oversight. Any implication that Reynoso […] bears responsibility is entirely unfounded and unfair."

Unfounded? OK, I'll go along with that. The responsibility should be squarely on the shoulders of the athlete. This isn't 2002, when Fernando Vargas could claim that he had no idea he was taking anabolic steroid pills prior to his showdown with Oscar De La Hoya. Ignorance is no excuse in 2025.

As for what's unfair, ask Yamanaka, Conceicao and Yafai if it was fair that the guys who pummeled them with the aid of performance-enhancing substances got to remain WBC titleholders or in the WBC rankings.

Here's what Surace had to say to The Ring:

"I was surprised to learn that Munguia tested positive under the VADA testing program we were both subjected to. Despite the positive test, the situation took an incredibly long time to unfold. He has since come back with a defense and an explanation that, let's be honest, looks shaky at best. I think nobody is fooled – everyone understands what really happened.

"If I had been in the same situation as him, the result of the fight would have been changed a long time ago. What I could control inside the ring, I did – and today, I can walk with my head held high, knowing that I never tested positive in these two fights [with Munguia] or any fight." RING

Have thoughts on the matter? Share them with The Ring and your comments could be featured in a future issue. Email comeoutwriting@gmail.com.

Richard Pelham

NO "TBE" IS SAFE

By Steve Kim

In the immediate aftermath of Terence Crawford's watershed victory over Canelo Alvarez on September 13, "Bud" has been bathed in accolades. And why not? His latest conquest made him a three-time undisputed champion and he put in his claim – a strong one, at that – as the best boxer of the post-Mayweather generation.

It's gotten to a point where some are even putting him in their all-time great lists, which may seem far-fetched, given that Crawford only has 42 bouts on his record, despite having won titles of various sorts from 135 to 168. He did skip the middleweight class, but there is a chance he could try and win a belt at 160.

Regardless, can a guy who has less than 50 fights on his ledger really be ranked alongside the likes of Mayweather and Manny Pacquiao, much less Sugar Ray Robinson, Henry Armstrong, Roberto Duran, Muhammad Ali and Archie Moore?

It reminds you of the story where Sugar Ray Leonard (who had a career mark of 36-3-1 with 25 KOs) asked legendary matchmaker Teddy Brenner how he compared to Robinson (174-19-6 with 109 KOs to his credit), to which Brenner replied that he could give a better opinion when Leonard had about 200 more fights.

This isn't to disparage Crawford or any other modern-day boxer, but the reality is that they don't fight nearly as often as their predecessors. And with that, it's much more difficult to truly assess their place among the all-timers who were forced to go through a more diverse set of opponents over time. Personally, I give credit to fighters who fought more and gave us more evidence of their greatness through more scenarios.

But Hall-of-Famer Tim Bradley is a believer, regardless of how many fights are on his record. To him, Bud is among the greats.

"I think Crawford's skill is legendary, period," said Bradley during an appearance on *The 3 Knockdown Rule* with Mario Lopez and yours truly a few weeks after Alvarez-Crawford. "I

Some say "Bud" is on the same level as "Money" – or even above.

think his accolades are unprecedented. Not many people have been able to accomplish that. I think Henry Armstrong was one of those guys. He held all three titles simultaneously in three different weight classes."

Bradley has long been an admirer of Crawford. He found out firsthand just how gifted the boxer from Omaha is when he brought him into camp as a sparring partner for his bout against Devon Alexander in 2011 and then his initial clash with Manny Pacquiao in 2012. He was immediately impressed.

"As far as skills go, I'm telling you guys: When I sparred him, I've never been in the ring with someone so complete [as] Bud Crawford. I've shared the ring with Pacquiao. Manny Pacquiao does not have the skill that Bud Crawford has," stated Bradley, who after his first sparring session with Crawford immediately dialed up Cameron Dunkin, who was managing both boxers at the time, and asked if he could get a piece of that contract.

Tim Bradley endorses Crawford as one of the greatest fighters ever.

From that time on, nobody has been a bigger believer in Crawford.

"Being that skillful, I mean, I could see Bud in the ring with any of the old-school legends. We'll never see these fights and I'm just speculating, but what can't he do? He has the size. He has a 75-inch reach. He has punching power and speed, an IQ that's unbelievable. He can fight inside the pocket. You seen him, in spots, fight Canelo in the pocket – where Canelo wanted to be – and beat him at his own game."

Coming into that bout, the mainstream had tabbed the Mexican superstar to come out victorious. After all, not only was he an elite fighter in his own right, but he was the naturally bigger man, having fought at super middleweight and beyond since 2018, and Crawford was jumping up two weight classes coming into the contest. But Bradley steadfastly maintained that his old sparring partner would win this fight relatively easily.

Some will accuse the outspoken Bradley of hyperbole. But for a few years now, another permanent resident of Canastota, James "Lights Out" Toney, has told anyone who would listen that there was only one current boxer that he truly respected – Crawford.

Bradley continued, "He has great reflexes. He has a great chin. I mean, there's nothing that Crawford doesn't have. And also the intangibles, too. This dude has toughness. He's mean as hell, killer instinct. He's an excellent finisher. He's a complete fighter, man. He's the most complete fighter I've *ever* seen in real life. And maybe one of the most complete fighters of all time.

"And let me say one more thing: He can do it from both sides."

Indeed, there is a strong argument that Crawford is the greatest switch-hitter the game has ever seen. It's to a point where it's difficult to remember that Crawford is right-handed.

You ask most educated observers and they will tell you that at the very least, Crawford could have competed well in any era of boxing. That is probably the fairest statement in regard to his standing among the giants of the sport.

There is also a lively debate online about who would've won a mythical bout between Crawford and Mayweather, the self-proclaimed "TBE" (The Best Ever). While some may now believe Crawford would have the upper hand, Bradley has stated this opinion for years. During his appearance on *The 3 Knockdown Rule* when this question was broached, Lopez – who was on the Alvarez-Crawford broadcast for Netflix – surmised that perhaps at 130 or 135, Mayweather would have the edge. At welterweight and above, it would favor Crawford.

To which Bradley responded: "Bud beats Mayweather at any weight – 130, 135, 140, 147, whatever it is. Mayweather would've never done what Bud did. He didn't have the *balls*. He brought Canelo down to [a 152-pound catchweight]. I'm telling y'all, it's a different mentality."

Coming into the Alvarez bout, Crawford made it clear that there was no rehydration limit imposed on the champion, or anything of that sort. This was just a good ol' fashioned super middleweight contest.

"Terence Crawford, he don't want to hear no excuses. He's going to fight you at the weight you are. That's the way it is, and that's the way it should be. He's going to beat you at your absolute best. He's not going to put any stipulations," stated Bradley, who then went even further. "I'll tell you this: Crawford beats Mayweather nine out of 10 times. Mayweather, please come back and do an exhibition with Terence Crawford. Please give us that look, and I promise you, he's not going to do anything vs. Terence Crawford."

Bradley also believes that Crawford is the better puncher of the two and that for Mayweather – because of Crawford's ability to fight as a left-hander – it would be like facing a much more difficult version of Zab Judah.

And then the coup de grace: "I think Bud Crawford might even stop Mayweather if they were to fight. That's how far I'll go. He'll even stop Mayweather. Mayweather has a 72-inch reach. Most of the guys that he faced had a small reach. Mayweather wouldn't even fight [Antonio] Margarito. He wouldn't even touch Margarito, bro, because he was too big and too aggressive.

"All Crawford has to do is be aggressive and go hunt Mayweather down. He can do that, too."

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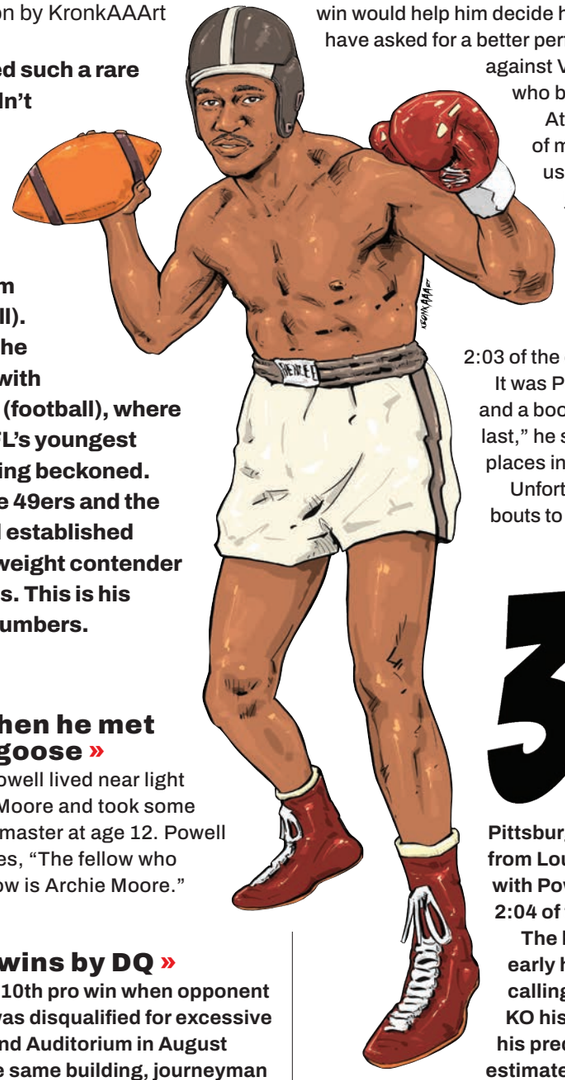
BY THE NUMBERS:

CHARLIE POWELL

by Don Stradley • Illustration by KronkAAArt

Charlie Powell possessed such a rare athleticism that he couldn't be contained by a single sport. As a high school standout, he attracted the attention of both the St. Louis Browns (baseball) and the Harlem Globetrotters (basketball). After a brief period with the Browns, he then signed with the San Francisco 49ers (football), where he became one of the NFL's youngest starting players. Yet boxing beckoned. While playing for both the 49ers and the Oakland Raiders, Powell established himself as a busy heavyweight contender during the 1950s and '60s. This is his incredible story, by the numbers.



12 years old when he met the Ol' Mongoose »

As a child in San Diego, Powell lived near light heavyweight legend Archie Moore and took some boxing lessons from the old master at age 12. Powell once told The New York Times, "The fellow who taught me most of what I know is Archie Moore."

2 consecutive wins by DQ »

Powell earned his 10th pro win when opponent Sandy McPherson was disqualified for excessive holding at the Oakland Auditorium in August 1954. One month later in the same building, journeyman Keene Simmons was disqualified when his handler stepped into the ring during the sixth round, concerned that Simmons' nose was bleeding too much. The fans jeered both fighters, which purportedly had Powell "near tears," according to the Oakland Tribune. "Gee," Powell said, "people are hard to please."

1 win over Nino Valdes »

Defeating the highly regarded Valdes was a career high point for Powell. The big Cuban was a 4-to-1 betting favorite when the pair clashed at the Miami Beach Auditorium in March 1959. Powell at the time was still uncertain if his future lay in boxing rings or on the gridiron. He believed a good win would help him decide his career path. He couldn't have asked for a better performance than the one he gave against Valdes, a perennial contender who boasted a record of 46-15-3.

At 6-foot-4 and looking like a wall of muscle at 213 pounds, Powell used his strong left jab and short, jolting hooks to dominate Valdes and knock him down multiple times. It was, as the United Press called it, a "slaughter," until referee Cy Gottfried stopped the bout at 2:03 of the eighth round.

It was Powell's 20th win in 25 fights and a boost to his self-esteem. "At last," he said after the bout, "I feel I'll go places in boxing."

Unfortunately, Powell lost his next two bouts to Roy Harris and Mike DeJohn.

3 rounds with Muhammad Ali »

It was Powell's misfortune to challenge a 21-year-old Ali, still known as Cassius Clay, in 1963. Before a crowd of 11,228 at the Pittsburgh Civic Arena, the upstart from Louisville had an easy time with Powell, scoring a knockout at 2:04 of the third.

The bout happened during Ali's early heyday, a time when he was calling the round in which he'd KO his opponent and making his predictions stick. He'd boldly estimated a third-round stoppage of Powell, which turned out to be his 13th correct prediction.

For his part, Powell admitted he had made a strategic blunder in trying to stop his younger, quicker opponent with one punch. "I should have jabbed more and kept the pressure on him," Powell said.

2 bouts with Charley Norkus »

Prior to the bout with Valdes, Powell had a score to settle with Charley Norkus, a rugged old pro known as "The Bayonne Bomber."

Norkus had the distinction of being the first to defeat Powell and ending his 12-bout unbeaten streak with a seventh-round stoppage in their 1954 bout in San Francisco. It was bad matchmaking – Norkus, though not a ranked contender, was experienced with 36 bouts to his credit. Powell was still learning on the job.

Predictably, their first fight was a slugfest, with Powell dropping Norkus in the opening round. The more seasoned fighter worked his way back, withstood another aggressive charge from Powell in the third and changed the tide of the fight by decking Powell in the fourth. The seventh was Powell's Waterloo, as Norkus floored him thrice more until the bout was stopped at the 2:10 mark. Powell came out of the fight with an injured right hand and the first of many accusations that his chin was weak. "In the final summary," wrote Sid Ziff of the Los Angeles Mirror, "young Powell could dish it out, but he couldn't take it."

The second battle of the Charleses took place four years later in San Diego. Powell avenged the earlier loss by winning a 10-round decision, but the dullish bout did little for his reputation. "This fight was supposed to prove whether Powell is a fighter or a football player," reported the San Diego Union. "It proved nothing."

Tough crowd. Is it any wonder Powell returned to football in 1960 for a season with the Raiders? (Incidentally, Powell's younger brother Art also played for the Raiders during his own excellent football career.)

1 loss to Floyd Patterson »

As Patterson tried to rebuild his career after his two losses to Sonny Liston, Powell seemed a reasonable choice for an opponent. Powell, by then, was a known commodity – he looked formidable, but he had never disproved the doubts about his chin. When they met in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in December 1964, Patterson emerged victorious by KO at 1:21 of the sixth.

Powell announced his retirement after the bout. "If you can't beat the best," he said, "there's no use in hanging around with the second-raters."

332 seconds with Britain's "Golden Boy" »

It may have been the shortest retirement in history. Powell returned to boxing within a few weeks to face British contender Billy Walker. Traveling overseas to fight Walker in London, Powell gave a performance The London Daily Mirror called "woefully disappointing." Walker, known affectionately in the U.K. press as "Golden Boy," shelled Powell from the opening bell and stopped him at 2:32 of the second. "I reckon I just underestimated him," Powell said.

The oddest incident of Powell's trip took place just a week before the bout. When the fighters had lunch in a Soho cafe to promote the event, Powell noticed a piano in the corner of the room. Knowing his way around the keyboard, Powell started playing. Walker quickly grabbed a microphone and sang "My Heart Cries For You," a tune he'd released a few months earlier on the Decca label. If the impromptu duet was part of Walker's pre-fight strategy to soften Powell up with a love song, it worked.

39 total fights »

Powell (1932-2014) retired for good after the debacle in England, though he spent a few more years as a sparring partner for hire. His final record was 25-11-3 with 17 knockouts.

In time, he acquired a sort of legendary status, that of the smashing defensive end who became a heavyweight boxer and fought Ali. The legend was such that The New York Times began Powell's obituary by calling him "the sort of athlete about whom Bunyanesque mythology was reasonably applied."

Yet his sheer athletic prowess may have ultimately prevented Powell from becoming a top-tier boxer. Could he have gone further in boxing had he not had so many other options? Perhaps. However, this is not a story of what could have been, but a lesson in what was: For some, a life of varied brilliance is more admirable than a singular, focused career. After all, how many of us can say we were compared favorably to Paul Bunyan? RING

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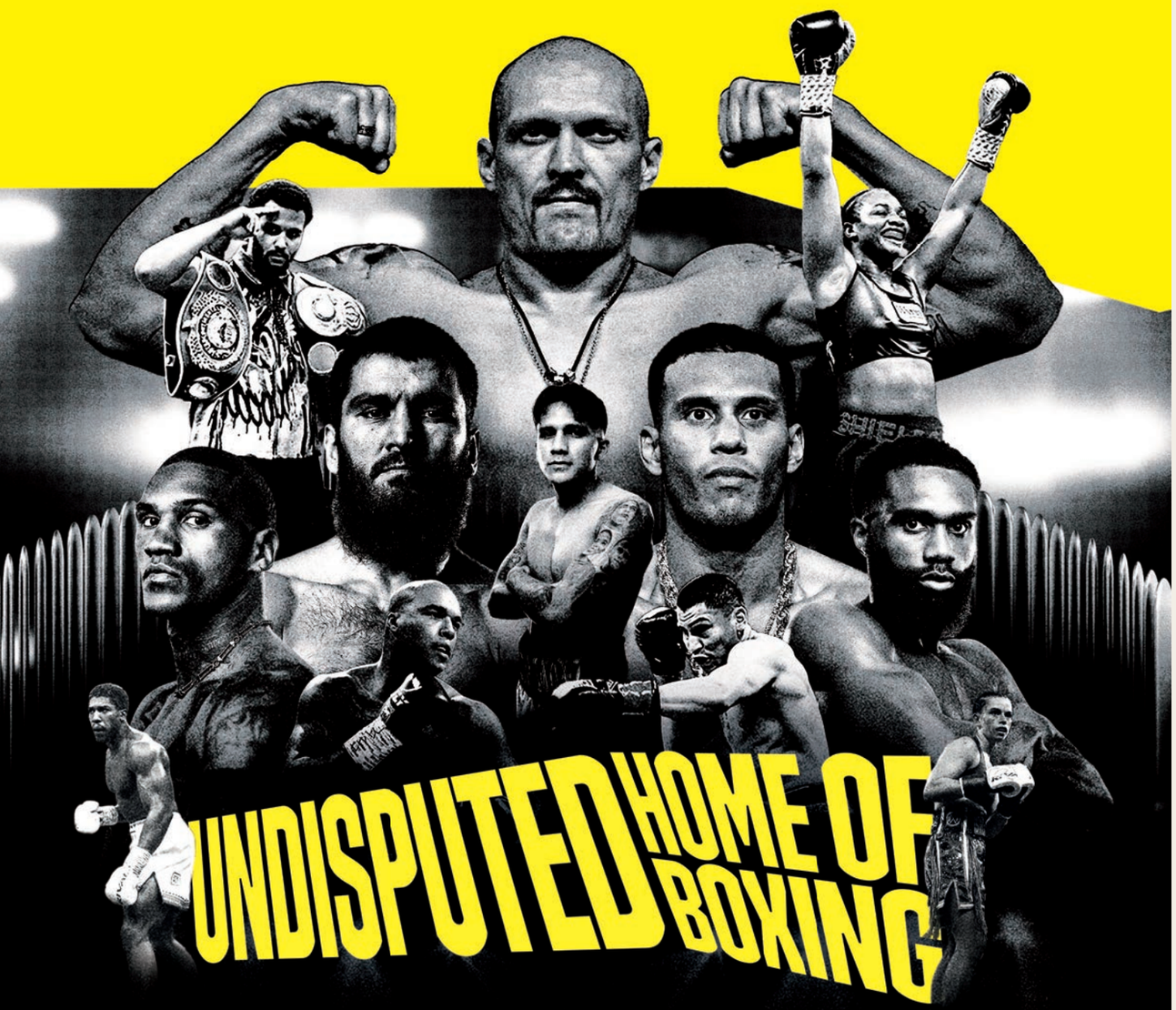

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Ring Ratings Through fights of October 11, 2025

Matthew Heasley

Recent Fight Results

MEN

175: Willy Hutchinson (No. 10) TKO 7 Mark Jeffers
154: Jaron Ennis (in No. 7) TKO 1 Uisma Lima
147: Eimantas Stanionis (No. 2) UD 10 Jabulani Makhense
126: Nathaniel Collins (No. 10) D 12 Cristobal Lorente
108: Shokichi Iwata (No. 6) KO 7 Edwin Cano Hernandez
108: Sivenathi Nontshinga (No. 5) removed for inactivity

WOMEN

154: Cecilia Braekhus (No. 2, ▲1) UD 10 Ema Kozin
160: Tamm Thibeault (No. 5, ▲2) TKO 1 Christina Mazzotta
135: Beatriz Ferreira (No. 2) UD 10 Maira Moneo
118: Amanda Galle (in at No. 5) UD 8 Alondra Hernandez
108: Kim Clavel (No. 2) moved down
105: Kim Clavel (in at No. 4) UD 10 Sol Cudos (No. 4, ▼1)
102: Esneidy Rodriguez Olmos (No. 3) UD 10 Mika Iwakawa

MEN'S RING RATINGS Through Oct. 11, 2025

CHAMPIONSHIP BELTS: ◆ RING ◆ IBF ◆ WBA ◆ WBC ◆ WBO | ★ NEW TO RATINGS

HEAVYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT UNLIMITED

C	**OLEKSANDR USYK** ◆◆◆◆◆	Ukraine • 24-0-0 (15 KOs)
1	**TYSON FURY**	U.K. • 34-2-1 (24 KOs)
2	**JOSEPH PARKER**	New Zealand • 36-3-0 (24 KOs)
3	**AGIT KABAYEL**	Germany • 26-0-0 (18 KOs)
4	**DANIEL DUBOIS**	U.K. • 22-3-0 (21 KOs)
5	**FILIP HRGOVIC**	Croatia • 19-1-0 (14 KOs)
6	**FABIO WARDLEY**	U.K. • 19-0-1 (18 KOs)
7	**ZHILEI ZHANG**	China • 27-3-1 (22 KOs)
8	**MARTIN BAKOLE**	Congo • 21-2-1 (16 KOs)
9	**MOSES ITAUMA**	U.K. • 13-0-0 (11 KOs)
10	**EFE AJAGBA**	Nigeria • 20-1-1 (14 KOs)

CRUISERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 200 POUNDS

C	**JAI OPETAIA** ◆◆	Australia • 28-0-0 (22 KOs)
1	**GILBERTO RAMIREZ** ◆◆	Mexico • 48-1-0 (30 KOs)
2	**CHRIS BILLAM-SMITH**	U.K. • 21-2-0 (13 KOs)
3	**MICHAL CIESLAK**	Poland • 28-2-0 (22 KOs)
4	**RYAN ROZICKI**	Canada • 20-1-1 (19 KOs)
5	**BADOU JACK** ◆	Sweden • 29-3-3 (17 KOs)
6	**NOEL MIKAELIAN**	Armenia • 27-3-0 (12 KOs)
7	**YAMIL PERALTA**	Argentina • 17-1-1 (9 KOs)
8	**LEONARDO MOSQUEA**	France • 17-0-0 (10 KOs)
9	**ROBIN SIRWAN SAFAR**	Sweden • 18-0-0 (13 KOs)
10	**VIDDAL RILEY**	U.K. • 13-0-0 (7 KOs)

LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 175 POUNDS

C	**DMITRY BIVOL** ◆◆◆◆	Russia • 24-1-0 (12 KOs)
1	**ARTUR BETERBIEV**	Russia • 21-1-0 (20 KOs)
2	**DAVID BENAVIDEZ** ◆	U.S. • 30-0-0 (24 KOs)
3	**CALLUM SMITH**	U.K. • 31-2-0 (22 KOs)
4	**ANTHONY YARDE**	U.K. • 27-3-0 (24 KOs)
5	**JOSHUA BUATSI**	U.K. • 19-1-0 (13 KOs)
6	**ALBERT RAMIREZ**	Venezuela • 22-0-0 (19 KOs)
7	**DAVID MORRELL**	Cuba • 12-1-0 (9 KOs)
8	**IMAM KHATAEV**	Australia • 10-1-0 (9 KOs)
9	**OLEKSANDR GVOZDYK**	Ukraine • 21-2-0 (17 KOs)
10	**WILLY HUTCHINSON**	U.K. • 19-2-0 (14 KOs)

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 168 POUNDS

C	**TERENCE CRAWFORD** ◆◆◆◆◆	U.S. • 42-0-0 (31 KOs)
1	**CANELO ALVAREZ**	Mexico • 63-3-2 (39 KOs)
2	**OSLEYS IGLESIAS**	Cuba • 14-0-0 (13 KOs)
3	**CHRISTIAN MBILLI**	France • 29-0-1 (24 KOs)
4	**LESTER MARTINEZ**	Guatemala • 19-0-1 (16 KOs)
5	**DIEGO PACHECO**	U.S. • 24-0-0 (18 KOs)
6	**JOSE ARMANDO RESENDIZ**	Mexico • 16-2-0 (11 KOs)
7	**CALEB PLANT**	U.S. • 23-3-0 (14 KOs)
8	**HAMZAH SHEERAZ**	U.K. • 22-0-1 (18 KOs)
9	**BRUNO SURACE**	France • 26-1-2 (5 KOs)
10	**WILLIAM SCULL**	Cuba • 23-1-0 (9 KOs)

MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 160 POUNDS

C	**(VACANT)**	
1	**ZHANIBEK ALIMKHANULY** ◆◆	Kazakhstan • 17-0-0 (12 KOs)
2	**CARLOS ADAMES** ◆	Dom. Rep. • 24-1-1 (18 KOs)
3	**CHRIS EUBANK JR.**	U.K. • 35-3-0 (25 KOs)
4	**YOENLI HERNANDEZ**	Cuba • 8-0-0 (7 KOs)
5	**TROY ISLEY**	U.S. • 15-0-0 (5 KOs)
6	**ETINOSA OLIHA**	Italy • 22-0-0 (10 KOs)
7	**AARON MCKENNA**	Ireland • 20-0-0 (10 KOs)
8	**AUSTIN WILLIAMS**	U.S. • 19-1-0 (13 KOs)
9	**DENZEL BENTLEY**	U.K. • 21-3-1 (17 KOs)
10	**MARQUIS TAYLOR**	U.S. • 18-1-2 (3 KOs)

JR. MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 154 POUNDS

C	**(VACANT)**	
1	**VERGIL ORTIZ**	U.S. • 23-0-0 (21 KOs)
2	**SEBASTIAN FUNDORA** ◆	U.S. • 23-1-1 (15 KOs)
3	**ISRAIL MADRIMOV**	Uzbekistan • 10-2-1 (7 KOs)
4	**BAKHRAM MURTAZALIEV** ◆	Russia • 23-0-0 (17 KOs)
5	**ERICKSON LUBIN**	U.S. • 27-2-0 (19 KOs)
6	**XANDER ZAYAS** ◆	Puerto Rico • 22-0-0 (13 KOs)
7	★ **JARON ENNIS**	U.S. • 35-0-0 (31 KOs)
8	-1 **BRANDON ADAMS**	U.S. • 26-4-0 (16 KOs)
9	-1 **JESUS RAMOS**	U.S. • 23-1-0 (19 KOs)
10	-1 **ABASS BARAOU**	Germany • 17-1-0 (9 KOs)

WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 147 POUNDS

C	**(VACANT)**	
1	**BRIAN NORMAN JR.** ◆	U.S. • 28-0-0 (22 KOs)
2	**EIMANTAS STANIONIS**	Lithuania • 16-1-0 (9 KOs)
3	**GIOVANI SANTILLAN**	U.S. • 34-1-0 (18 KOs)
4	**ROHAN POLANCO**	Dom. Rep. • 17-0-0 (10 KOs)
5	**SHAKHRAM GIYASOV**	Uzbekistan • 17-0-0 (10 KOs)
6	**ALEXIS ROCHA**	U.S. • 25-2-1 (16 KOs)
7	**RAUL CURIEL**	Mexico • 16-0-1 (14 KOs)
8	**MARIO BARRIOS** ◆	U.S. • 29-2-2 (18 KOs)
9	**MANNY PACQUIAO**	Philippines • 62-8-3 (39 KOs)
10	**EKOW ESSUMAN**	U.K. • 22-1-0 (8 KOs)

JR. WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 140 POUNDS

C	**TEOFIMO LOPEZ** ◆◆	U.S. • 22-1-0 (13 KOs)
1	**RICHARDSON HITCHINS** ◆	U.S. • 20-0-0 (8 KOs)
2	**SUBRIEL MATIAS** ◆	Puerto Rico • 23-2-0 (22 KOs)
3	**ALBERTO PUELLO**	Dom. Rep. • 24-1-0 (10 KOs)
4	**ARNOLD BARBOZA**	U.S. • 32-1-0 (11 KOs)
5	**GARY ANTUANNE RUSSELL** ◆	U.S. • 18-1-0 (17 KOs)
6	**SANDOR MARTIN**	Spain • 42-4-0 (15 KOs)
7	**DALTON SMITH**	U.K. • 18-0-0 (13 KOs)
8	**ANDY HIRAOKA**	Japan • 24-0-0 (19 KOs)
9	**LINDOLFO DELGADO**	Mexico • 23-0-0 (16 KOs)
10	**ADAM AZIM**	U.K. • 13-0-0 (10 KOs)

MEN'S RING RATINGS Through Oct. 11, 2025

CHAMPIONSHIP BELTS: ◆ RING ◆ IBF ◆ WBA ◆ WBC ◆ WBO | ★ NEW TO RATINGS

LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 135 POUNDS

C (VACANT)

1 SHAKUR STEVENSON ◆
U.S. • 24-0-0 (11 KOs)

2 GERVONTA DAVIS ◆
U.S. • 30-0-1 (28 KOs)

3 RAYMOND MURATALLA ◆
U.S. • 23-0-0 (17 KOs)

4 WILLIAM ZEPEDA
Mexico • 33-1-0 (27 KOs)

5 ANDY CRUZ
Cuba • 6-0-0 (3 KOs)

6 FLOYD SCHOFIELD
U.S. • 19-0-0 (13 KOs)

7 DENYS BERINCHYK
Ukraine • 19-1-0 (9 KOs)

8 SAM NOAKES
U.K. • 17-0-0 (15 KOs)

9 ABDULLAH MASON
U.S. • 19-0-0 (17 KOs)

10 LUCAS BAHDI
Canada • 20-0-0 (15 KOs)

JR. LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 130 POUNDS

C (VACANT)

1 O'SHAQUIE FOSTER ◆
U.S. • 23-3-0 (12 KOs)

2 EMANUEL NAVARRETE ◆
Mexico • 39-2-1 (32 KOs)

3 ANTHONY CACACE
Ireland • 24-1-0 (9 KOs)

4 LAMONT ROACH ◆
U.S. • 25-1-2 (10 KOs)

5 EDUARDO NUNEZ ◆
Mexico • 29-1-0 (27 KOs)

6 ROBSON CONCEICAO
Brazil • 20-3-1 (10 KOs)

7 EDUARDO HERNANDEZ
Mexico • 37-2-0 (32 KOs)

8 CHARLY SUAREZ
Philippines • 18-0-0 (10 KOs)

9 RAYMOND FORD
U.S. • 18-1-1 (8 KOs)

10 JAMES DICKENS
U.K. • 36-5-0 (15 KOs)

FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 126 POUNDS

C (VACANT)

1 RAFAEL ESPINOZA ◆
Mexico • 27-0-0 (23 KOs)

2 ANGELO LEO ◆
U.S. • 26-1-0 (12 KOs)

3 NICK BALL ◆
U.K. • 23-0-1 (13 KOs)

4 STEPHEN FULTON ◆
U.S. • 23-1-0 (8 KOs)

5 LUIS ALBERTO LOPEZ
Mexico • 31-3-0 (18 KOs)

6 BRUCE CARRINGTON
U.S. • 16-0-0 (9 KOs)

7 BRANDON FIGUEROA
U.S. • 26-2-1 (19 KOs)

8 MIRCO CUELLO
Argentina • 16-0-0 (13 KOs)

9 ROBEISY RAMIREZ
Cuba • 14-3-0 (9 KOs)

10 NATHANIEL COLLINS
U.K. • 17-0-1 (8 KOs)

JR. FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 122 POUNDS

C NAOYA INOUE ◆◆◆◆◆
Japan • 31-0-0 (27 KOs)

1 MARLON TAPALES
Philippines • 40-4-0 (21 KOs)

2 LUIS NERY
Mexico • 36-2-0 (28 KOs)

3 MURODJON AKHMADALIEV
Uzbekistan • 14-2-0 (11 KOs)

4 SAM GOODMAN
Australia • 20-1-0 (8 KOs)

5 ALAN PICASSO
Mexico • 32-0-1 (17 KOs)

6 SHABAZ MASOUD
U.K. • 14-0-0 (4 KOs)

7 TJ DOHENY
Ireland • 26-6-0 (20 KOs)

8 RAMON CARDENAS
U.S. • 26-2-0 (14 KOs)

9 SEBASTIAN HERNANDEZ
Mexico • 20-0-0 (18 KOs)

10 SUBARU MURATA
Japan • 10-0-0 (10 KOs)

Naoki Fukuda

BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 118 POUNDS

C (VACANT)

1 SEIYA TSUTSUMI ◆
Japan • 12-0-3 (8 KOs)

2 CHRISTIAN MEDINA ◆
Mexico • 26-4-0 (19 KOs)

3 RYOSUKE NISHIDA
Japan • 10-1-0 (2 KOs)

4 TAKUMA INOUE
Japan • 20-2-0 (5 KOs)

5 DAIGO HIGA
Japan • 21-3-3 (19 KOs)

6 ANTONIO VARGAS
U.S. • 19-1-1 (11 KOs)

7 YOSHIKI TAKEI
Japan • 11-1-0 (9 KOs)

8 TENSHIN NASUKAWA
Japan • 7-0-0 (2 KOs)

9 JASON MOLONEY
Australia • 27-4-0 (19 KOs)

10 JEYVIER CINTRON
Puerto Rico • 13-1-0 (6 KOs)

JR. BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 115 POUNDS

C JESSE RODRIGUEZ ◆◆◆
U.S. • 22-0-0 (15 KOs)

1 FERNANDO MARTINEZ ◆
Argentina • 18-0-0 (9 KOs)

2 KAZUTO IOKA
Japan • 31-4-1 (16 KOs)

3 CARLOS CUADRAS
Mexico • 44-5-1 (28 KOs)

4 DAVID JIMENEZ
Costa Rica • 18-1-0 (12 KOs)

5 PHUMELELE CAFU
S. Africa • 11-1-3 (8 KOs)

6 ANDREW MOLONEY
Australia • 27-4-0 (17 KOs)

7 RICARDO MALAJIKA
S. Africa • 16-2-0 (12 KOs)

8 WILLIBALDO GARCIA ◆
Mexico • 23-6-2 (13 KOs)

9 RENE CALIXTO BIBIANO
Mexico • 23-1-1 (9 KOs)

10 JAYR RAQUINEL
Philippines • 18-2-1 (14 KOs)

FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 112 POUNDS

C (VACANT)

1 RICARDO SANDOVAL ◆◆
U.S. • 27-2-0 (18 KOs)

2 KENSHIRO TERAJI
Japan • 25-2-0 (16 KOs)

3 SEIGO YURI AKUI
Japan • 21-3-1 (11 KOs)

4 MASAMICHI YABUKI ◆
Japan • 18-4-0 (17 KOs)

5 GALAL YAFAI
U.K. • 9-1-0 (7 KOs)

6 ANTHONY OLASCUAGA ◆
U.S. • 10-1-0 (7 KOs)

7 ANGEL AYALA
Mexico • 18-1-0 (8 KOs)

8 FELIX ALVARADO
Nicaragua • 42-4-0 (35 KOs)

9 TOBIAS REYES
Argentina • 17-1-1 (16 KOs)

10 JUKIYA IIMURA
Japan • 9-1-0 (2 KOs)

JR. FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 108 POUNDS

C (VACANT)

1 CARLOS CANIZALES ◆
Venezuela • 28-3-1 (20 KOs)

2 KYOSUKE TAKAMI ◆
Japan • 10-0-0 (8 KOs)

3 RENE SANTIAGO ◆
Puerto Rico • 14-4-0 (9 KOs)

4 THANONGSAK SIMSRI ◆
Thailand • 39-1-0 (34 KOs)

5 ▲+1 SHOKICHI IWATA
Japan • 15-2-0 (2 KOs)

6 ▲+1 REGIE SUGANOB
Philippines • 16-1-0 (6 KOs)

7 ▲+1 CRISTIAN ARANETA
Philippines • 25-3-0 (20 KOs)

8 ▲+1 ERIK BADILLO
Mexico • 18-0-0 (8 KOs)

9 ▲+1 MASATAKA TANIGUCHI
Japan • 21-5-0 (15 KOs)

10 ★ ARAR ANDALES
Philippines • 18-2-3 (8 KOs)

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MEN'S RING RATINGS Through Oct. 11, 2025

CHAMPIONSHIP BELTS: ◆ RING ◆ IBF ◆ WBA ◆ WBC ◆ WBO | ★ NEW TO RATINGS

STRAWWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 105 POUNDS

C **OSCAR COLLAZO** ◆◆◆
U.S. • 13-0-0 (10 KOs)

1 **MELVIN JERUSALEM** ◆
Philippines • 24-3-0 (12 KOs)

2 **PEDRO TADURAN** ◆
Philippines • 18-4-1 (13 KOs)

3 **KNOCKOUT CP FRESHMART**
Thailand • 28-1-0 (11 KOs)

4 **SIYAKHOLWA KUSE**
S. Africa • 9-2-1 (4 KOs)

5 **RYUSEI MATSUMOTO**
Japan • 7-0-0 (4 KOs)

6 **JOEY CANOY**
Philippines • 24-5-2 (15 KOs)

7 **TAKESHI ISHII**
Japan • 11-1-0 (8 KOs)

8 **YUNI TAKADA**
Japan • 16-9-3 (6 KOs)

9 **VIC SALUDAR**
Philippines • 26-6-0 (16 KOs)

10 **BEAVEN SIBANDA**
Zimbabwe • 9-1-0 (3 KOs)

HOW OUR RATINGS ARE COMPILED
RECORDS PROVIDED BY BOXREC.COM

Championship vacancies can be filled in the following two ways: 1. The Ring's Nos. 1 and 2 contenders fight one another. 2. If the Nos. 1 and 2 contenders choose not to fight one another and No. 1 fights No. 3, that matchup could be for the Ring title if the Editorial Board deems No. 3 worthy.

A champion can lose their belt in six situations: 1. The Champion loses a fight in the weight class in which they are champion; 2. The Champion moves to another weight class; 3. The Champion does not schedule a fight in any weight class for 18 months, although injuries and certain other unforeseen circumstances could be taken into consideration; 4. The Champion does not schedule a fight at their championship weight for 18 months (even if they fight at another weight); 5. The Champion does not schedule a fight with a Top-5 contender from any weight class for two years; 6. The Champion retires.

The Ring Editorial Board considers input from the Ratings Panel of boxing journalists from around the world and then decides collectively what changes will be made. That applies to both the pound-for-pound and divisional ratings.

POUND FOR POUND LIST

MEN

1 **TERENCE CRAWFORD**
U.S. • 42-0-0 (31 KOs)

2 **OLEKSANDR USYK**
Ukraine • 24-0-0 (15 KOs)

3 **NAOYA INOUE**
Japan • 31-0-0 (27 KOs)

4 **DMITRY BIVOL**
Russia • 24-1-0 (12 KOs)

5 **ARTUR BETERBIEV**
Russia • 21-1-0 (20 KOs)

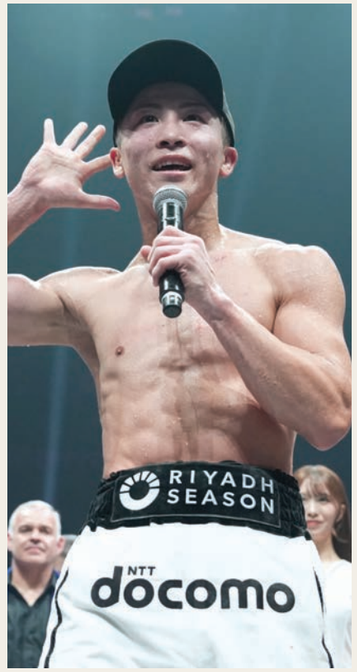
6 **JESSE RODRIGUEZ**
U.S. • 22-0-0 (15 KOs)

7 **JUNTO NAKATANI**
Japan • 31-0-0 (24 KOs)

8 **SHAKUR STEVENSON**
U.S. • 24-0-0 (11 KOs)

9 **DAVID BENAVIDEZ**
U.S. • 30-0-0 (24 KOs)

10 **CANELO ALVAREZ**
Mexico • 63-3-2 (39 KOs)



Inoue retains his status as one of the top three fighters in the world.

Naoki Fukuda

WOMEN

1 **KATIE TAYLOR**
Ireland • 25-1-0 (6 KOs)

2 **CLARESSA SHIELDS**
U.S. • 17-0-0 (3 KOs)

3 **CHANTELLE CAMERON**
U.K. • 21-1-0 (8 KOs)

4 **AMANDA SERRANO**
Puerto Rico • 47-4-1 (31 KOs)

5 **DINA THORSLUND**
Denmark • 23-0-0 (9 KOs)

6 **GABRIELA FUNDORA**
U.S. • 17-0-0 (9 KOs)

7 **LAUREN PRICE**
U.K. • 9-0-0 (2 KOs)

8 **YOKASTA VALLE**
Costa Rica • 33-3-0 (10 KOs)

9 **MIKAELA MAYER**
U.S. • 21-2-0 (5 KOs)

10 **TINA RUPPRECHT**
Germany • 15-1-1 (3 KOs)

WOMEN'S RING RATINGS Through Oct. 11, 2025

CHAMPIONSHIP BELTS: ◆ RING ◆ IBF ◆ WBA ◆ WBC ◆ WBO | ★ NEW TO RATINGS

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 168 POUNDS

C **SHADASIA GREEN** ◆◆◆
U.S. • 16-1-0 (11 KOs)
1 **FRANCHON CREWS-DEZURN** ◆◆
U.S. • 10-2-0 (2 KOs)
2 **SAVANNAH MARSHALL**
U.K. • 13-2-0 (10 KOs)
3 **LANI DANIELS**
New Zealand • 11-3-2 (1 KO)
4 **MARY CASAMASSA**
U.S. • 6-1-0 (1 KO)
5 **CITLALLI ORTIZ**
Mexico • 4-2-0 (1 KO)

MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 160 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **DESLEY ROBINSON** ◆◆
Australia • 10-3-0 (3 KOs)
2 **MELINDA WATPOOL**
Canada • 7-1-0 (2 KOs)
3 ▲+2 **TAMM THIBEAULT**
Canada • 4-0-0 (3 KOs)
4 ▼-1 **MAPULE NGUBANE**
S. Africa • 14-9-3 (3 KOs)
5 ▼-1 **ADRIANA DOS SANTOS ARAUJO**
Brazil • 6-3-0 (1 KO)

JR. MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 154 POUNDS

C. **(VACANT)**
1 ▲+1 **CECILIA BRAEKHUS** ◆◆
Norway • 39-2-1 (9 KOs)
2 ▼-1 **OSHAE JONES** ◆
U.S. • 9-0-0 (3 KOs)
3 **FEMKE HERMANS**
Belgium • 18-5-0 (7 KOs)
4 **MARY SPENCER** ◆
Canada • 10-2-0 (6 KOs)
5 **PRISCILLA PETERLE**
France • 11-0-0 (3 KOs)

WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 147 POUNDS

C **LAUREN PRICE** ◆◆◆◆
U.K. • 9-0-0 (2 KO)
1 **MIKAELA MAYER** ◆
U.S. • 21-2-0 (5 KOs)
2 **SANDY RYAN**
U.K. • 8-3-1 (3 KOs)
3 **NATASHA JONAS**
U.K. • 16-3-1 (9 KOs)
4 **STEPHANIE AQUINO**
Puerto Rico • 9-0-0 (3 KOs)
5 **MICHAELA KOTASKOVA**
Czech Rep. • 11-0-2 (4 KOs)

JR. WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 140 POUNDS

C **KATIE TAYLOR** ◆◆◆◆
Ireland • 25-1-0 (6 KOs)
1 **CHANTELLE CAMERON** ◆
U.K. • 21-1-0 (8 KOs)
2 **AMANDA SERRANO**
Puerto Rico • 47-4-1 (31 KOs)
3 **SAMANTHA WORTHINGTON**
U.S. • 12-0-0 (7 KOs)
4 **FLORA PILI**
France • 11-0-0 (2 KOs)
5 **ELIZABETH OSHOBA**
Nigeria • 9-0-0 (5 KOs)

LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 135 POUNDS

C. **(VACANT)**
1 **CAROLINE DUBOIS** ◆
U.K. • 11-0-1 (5 KOs)
2 **BEATRIZ FERREIRA** ◆
Brazil • 8-0-0 (2 KOs)
3 **TERRI HARPER** ◆
U.K. • 16-2-2 (6 KOs)
4 **RHIANNON DIXON**
U.K. • 10-1-0 (1 KO)
5 **HOLLY HOLM**
U.S. • 34-2-3 (9 KOs)

JR. LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 130 POUNDS

C **ALYCIA BAUMGARDNER** ◆◆◆◆
U.S. • 16-1-0 (7 KOs)
1 **LEILA BEAUDOIN**
Canada • 13-1-0 (2 KOs)
2 **DELFINE PERSOON**
Belgium • 50-3-0 (20 KOs)
3 **JENNIFER MIRANDA**
Spain • 12-1-0 (1 KO)
4 **MEA MOTU**
New Zealand • 22-1-0 (9 KOs)
5 **ELIF NUR TURHAN**
Turkiye • 11-0-0 (7 KOs)

FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 126 POUNDS

C **AMANDA SERRANO** ◆◆◆
Puerto Rico • 47-4-1 (31 KOs)
1 **TIARA BROWN** ◆
U.S. • 20-0-0 (11 KOs)
2 **NINA MEINKE** ◆
German • 20-3-0 (4 KOs)
3 **SKYE NICOLSON**
Australia • 14-1-0 (3 KOs)
4 **SARAH MAHFOUD**
Denmark • 15-2-0 (3 KOs)
5 **DANIELA BERMUDEZ**
Argentina • 32-6-3 (12 KOs)

JR. FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 122 POUNDS

C **ELLIE SCOTNEY** ◆◆◆◆
U.K. • 11-0-0 (0 KOs)
1 **YAMILETH MERCADO**
Mexico • 24-4-0 (5 KOs)
2 **SEGOLENE LEFEBVRE**
France • 19-1-0 (1 KO)
3 **MAYELLI FLORES ROSQUERO** ◆
Mexico • 13-1-1 (4 KOs)
4 **ERIKA CRUZ-HERNANDEZ**
Mexico • 18-2-1 (4 KOs)
5 **NAZARENA ROMERO**
Argentina • 14-1-2 (8 KOs)

BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 118 POUNDS

C **DINA THORSLUND** ◆
Denmark • 23-0-0 (9 KOs)
1 **CHERNEKA JOHNSON** ◆◆◆◆
Australia • 18-2-0 (8 KOs)
2 **DIANA LAURA FERNANDEZ**
Mexico • 35-4-1 (5 KOs)
3 **SHURRETTA METCALF**
U.S. • 14-5-1 (2 KOs)
4 **FLORENCIA JUAREZ**
Argentina • 13-1-0 (1 KO)
5 ★ **AMANDA GALLE**
Canada • 12-0-1 (1 KO)

JR. BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 115 POUNDS

C **MIZUKI HIRUTA** ◆◆
Japan • 9-0-0 (2 KOs)
1 **GINNY FUCHS**
U.S. • 4-0-0 (1 KO)
2 **ADELAIDA RUIZ**
U.S. • 17-1-1 (8 KOs)
3 **ASLEY GONZALEZ** ◆
Mexico • 17-2-0 (7 KOs)
4 **CARLA MERINO**
Argentina • 16-3-0 (4 KOs)
5 **EMMA DOLAN**
U.K. • 8-0-0 (1 KO)

FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 112 POUNDS

C **GABRIELA FUNDORA** ◆◆◆◆◆
U.S. • 17-0-0 (9 KOs)
1 **KENIA ENRIQUEZ**
Mexico • 28-1-0 (11 KOs)
2 **ARELY MUCINO**
Mexico • 32-5-2 (11 KOs)
3 **JASMINA ZAPOTOCZNA**
U.K. • 9-1-0 (0 KOs)
4 **MARILYN BADILLO AMAYA**
Mexico • 19-1-1 (3 KOs)
5 **ADRIANA THALIA PINEIRO**
Uruguay • 9-0-0 (1 KO)

JR. FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 108 POUNDS

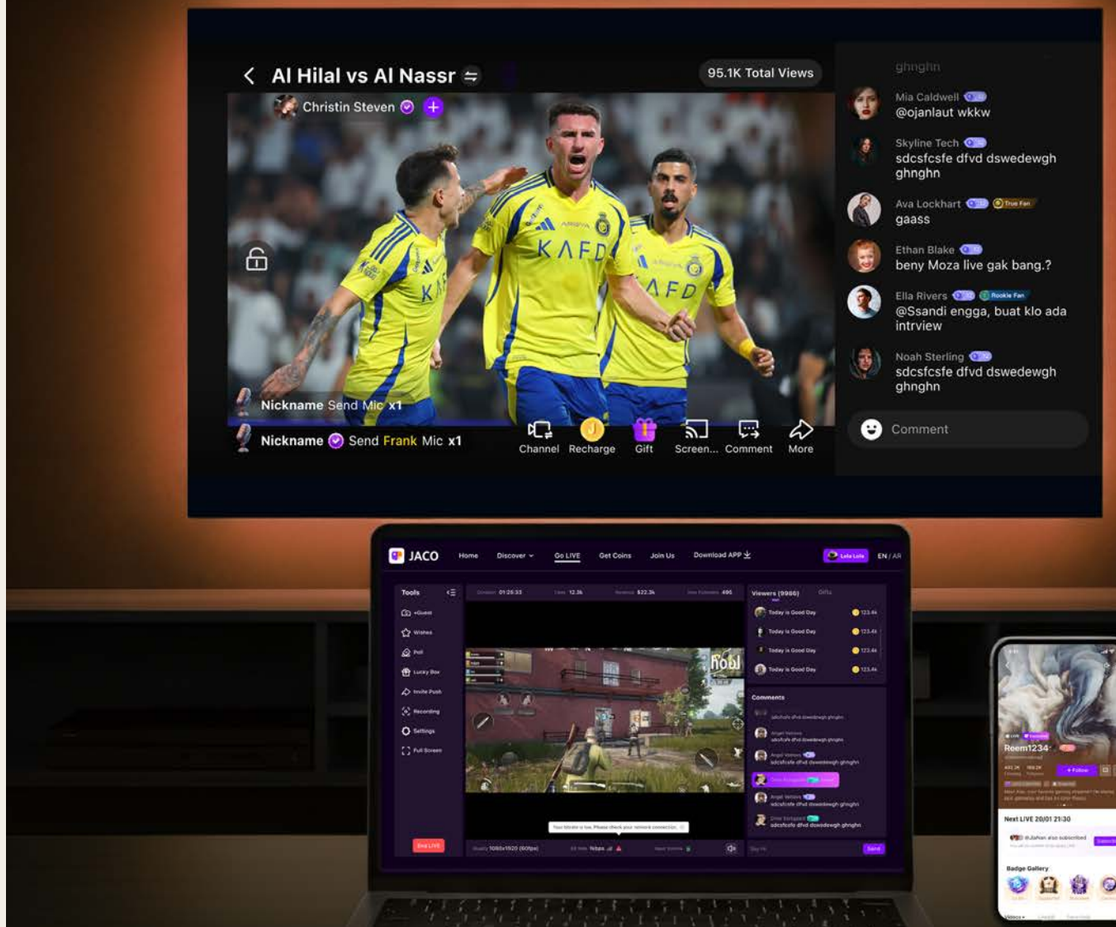
C **(VACANT)**
1 **EVELIN BERMUDEZ** ◆◆◆
Argentina • 22-1-1 (8 KOs)
2 ▲+1 **LOURDES JUAREZ** ◆
Mexico • 38-4-0 (5 KOs)
3 ▲+1 **GABRIELA ALANIZ**
Argentina • 17-2-0 (7 KOS)
4 ▲+1 **SARA BAILEY**
Canada • 6-1-0 (0 KOs)
5 ★ **ESTEFANY OSORIO**
Mexico • 13-1-0 (4 KOs)

STRAWWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 105 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **YOKASTA VALLE** ◆
Costa Rica • 33-3-0 (10 KOs)
2 **SARAH BORMANN** ◆
Germany • 20-1-0 (7 KOs)
3 **YUKO KUROKI** ◆
Japan • 25-8-2 (10 KOs)
4 ★ **KIM CLAVEL** ◆
Canada • 22-2-0 (3 KOs)
5 ▼-1 **SOL CUDOS**
Argentina • 10-1-2 (3 KOs)

ATOMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 102 POUNDS

C **TINA RUPPRECHT** ◆◆◆◆◆
Germany • 15-1-1 (3 KOs)
1 **SUMIRE YAMANAKA**
Japan • 8-1-0 (3 KOs)
2 **ERI MATSUDA**
Japan • 8-2-1 (1 KO)
3 **ESNEIDY RODRIGUEZ OLMOS**
Mexico • 11-0-1 (1 KO)
4 **CAMILA ZAMORANO**
Mexico • 12-0-0 (1 KO)
5 **NAO UGAWA**
Japan • 6-0-0 (0 KOs)



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IN REMEMBRANCE OF OUR FRIEND,

TOM GERBASI

By Joseph Santoliquito

He could always make you laugh. Regardless of where you were. Regardless of what you were doing. Regardless of what was happening around you. Tom Gerbasi could always put a smile on your face. He had that touching gift.

It's why his passing of a heart attack on Tuesday, September 16, at the age of 57 struck so many so hard in the combat sports community and beyond. He will resonate as someone who could always make you feel better about yourself after speaking to him. He had a way of twisting the mean into the likable.

Tributes in his memory ranged from the UFC to The Ring to Yahoo Sports to Gotham Roller Derby and every boxing website imaginable. When his passing was announced on the Boxing Writers Association of America X account, it received 151,000 views.

That is the kind of impact Gerbasi – an immensely talented writer who penned numerous books, was a longtime Ring contributor and the UFC's editorial director for the past 20 years – had on the industry and the many he encountered on his journey.

"After all this time, Tom probably didn't even know it," said his wife, Sonia Rodriguez Gerbasi. "I can hardly say anything about him without crying – and laughing."

They met when Sonia was a building facilities manager and Tom was working for the building facilities crew upon his graduation from St. John's University. It's why Tom always playfully referred to Sonia as "the boss," because she was his boss. Tom was working maintenance, cleaning bathrooms and toilets. Sonia's job was to make sure Tom did his job.

He got one of his buddies to come around and ask Sonia if she had a boyfriend. It started with lunch, and that gradually turned into a relationship.

They dated for two years and Tom popped the question in the only way Tom could: He asked Sonia if he could see her finger. Sonia, of course, found the question strange. Tom placed the engagement ring on Sonia's finger and asked, "Do you want to marry me?" A shocked Sonia looked at him and said, 'Yeah!"

They were going to a Long Island Italian restaurant called Vincent's Clam Bar, which happened to be the last restaurant where Sonia and Tom had dinner together. Tom died on the couple's 31st wedding anniversary.

He is also survived by his daughter Jordan Gerbasi-Fanticola, and his granddaughters, 5-year-old Sheala and 3-year-old Olivia Fanticola, who Tom lovingly referred to as "his buddies."

"It still hurts. It will always hurt, after being together for 33 years," Sonia said. "Everything made him special. He was funny. He had a good heart. He wanted to take care of everything and everyone. The love he had for his family spread out to the love he had for the work he did, which includes the fighters he covered.

"We cry over him, and we laugh over him, because Tom would not want anyone to cry over him. He would want us all to laugh and smile in his memory.

"Tom was a gift to me, to his family. Tom was a gift to us all."

There were countless people and stories about Gerbasi. No one could ever have a five-minute conversation with him. He spoke in that infectious staccato, Staten Island accent. He had the ability to cross over lines, always seeing things from a positive perspective.

Dave Sholler, chief communications officer for the Philadelphia 76ers and Washington Commanders, got his start in the sports media business through Gerbasi in 2008. At the time, Sholler was covering boxing for local and online outlets, and after six months of pestering Gerbasi, he got his chance to do a freelance UFC story and interviewed a fighter named Ivan Salaverry. About 10 months into Sholler's freelance work for UFC, Gerbasi, knowing Sholler's background in communications, had heard about a public relations opening at the WEC, which at the time was UFC's sister company focusing on lighter weight classes. It was Gerbasi who put a word in for Sholler.

Sholler flew out to Las Vegas on a Friday afternoon. By Monday, Sholler

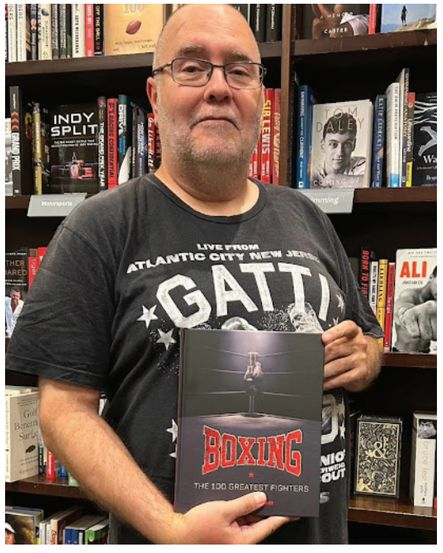
had the job and was packing his bags for Las Vegas.

"It was Tom who really opened a key door that created an incredible pathway for the rest of my development as a sports professional," said Sholler, now in a high-profile corporate role under Josh Harris' ownership of the Commanders and 76ers. "It's not overstating it when I say I am not where I am without TG. I'm not here without his mentorship, his support and his guidance.

"When I think about Tom, one word comes to mind: dependability. As I rose through the ranks and reached the UFC, he was always there for us, regardless of the time of day. When I got a chance to make the move back to the East Coast and work for the childhood team I grew up rooting for [the 76ers], Tom was the first person I called. I remember Tom telling me, 'It's OK to have more than one dream, and it's OK to chase those dreams. Go chase your next dream.' Those words were so important to me. That was Tom to a T. He knew what to say and when to say it."

Thomas Hauser, the Hall of Fame author and journalist, met Tom in 2000 when he joined the House of Boxing, the pioneering website founded in the late '90s by Gary Randall and Ring Editor-in-Chief Doug Fischer. Shortly after HOB was bought by entrepreneurial sports agent Marc Roberts in late 1999, Gerbasi, Hauser and legendary boxing columnist Michael Katz were added to the staff. However, when the HOB finances dried up, Randall, Fischer, Gerbasi and staff writer Steve Kim started MaxBoxing.com in 2001.

"Tom was one of those rare people who everybody liked, and no one had a bad word to say about," Hauser said. "Tom also had character, and Tom wasn't a good guy, he was a great guy. He did two things really well, as a reliable reporter and his greatest strength was a good ear for quotes. He was a good, reliable reporter with a great rapport with fighters."



It is not easy to get athletes to commit to an interview. Everyone loved Gerbasi. Including fighters. It did not matter if they were MMA fighters or boxers. Fighters never felt like they were being interrogated when they spoke to Gerbasi. He worked in the fast-paced world of the UFC, had considerable contributions as a pioneer of internet boxing coverage, and found time as a 57-year-old to play soccer with 20-somethings, cover roller derby, spend time with his family – and still chase his passion.

Gerbasi possessed the rare combination of a caring nature, in a social media world where everyone just cares about themselves, and he also took his craft seriously.

"One of the things that made Tom an invaluable member of our staffs at The Ring and at BoxingScene.com, and one of the best dudes I've ever known, is that was he genuinely cared about people," said Keith Idec, a Ring staff writer and member of the New Jersey Boxing Hall of Fame. "That's why he was universally liked, which is so rare in our business.

"It's also why it didn't matter to him whether he wrote about the 'A' side of the main event or an unknown prospect on the undercard. Tom took a detailed, thoughtful approach to every feature he wrote because it always mattered to him to tell someone's story accurately and thoroughly.

"He took his craft seriously, but never himself. He had a fantastic sense of humor, was self-deprecating and never seemed to let the pressures and annoyances of the job get to him. He was such an easygoing, low-maintenance, reliable professional that he was the perfect teammate. In so many ways, we won't be able to replace him."

Matt Richardson still writes about boxing, now for CBSNews.com. He sat with Tom many times at ringside, when Tom was with House of Boxing. They were two Staten Island guys who loved boxing writing in the nascent days of boxing on the internet.

There were many occasions the two would be gripping each other's forearms during titanic bouts, like when Felix Trinidad fought Ricardo Mayorga in October 2004.

"I would have this melancholy feeling after fights, not because the fight was over, but because I was leaving Tom," Richardson said. "I told Sonia about a special story. During COVID, in the summer of 2020, we had no power in the middle of August. I had a 1-year-old and a 4-year-old. Sure enough, Tom offered up his house for me and the kids. I was so touched by that. But that was Tom. It underlines just who Tom was.

"I can hear him now: 'Richardson, what are you doing crying over me!' Tom never talked trash on anyone. And something you never heard was anyone talking trash on Tom. That's rare in boxing."

Fischer met Gerbasi online in the 1990s, when Gerbasi was doing public relations work for a female fighter named Leah Mellinger. Gerbasi pitched Fischer a freelance story on Mellinger, when women's boxing was at a different stage than it is today. Gerbasi was so engaging and fun that he talked Fischer into it.

It started a 25-plus-year relationship.

"Tom always had a story, and he would preface a story by saying, 'Ya want to laugh,'" Fischer recalled. "In 1999, when Roberts bought House of Boxing, one of the first things we did was hire Tom to be a regular writer in New York City, even though we had Thomas Hauser and Michael Katz. They were columnists, and we needed someone on the front lines, and that was Tom.

"Tom was also a great copy editor. We bonded over our love of boxing history and [the shared frustrations of] copy editing. Tom was integral to House of Boxing, and equally integral to MaxBoxing. Those websites would not have worked without Tom. With our personalities and egos, we were always clashing, and Tom was always above the internal bickering. (laughs) Tom would call himself 'the bartender.' He was the adult in our room. Katz's ego was larger than all our egos combined – and Tom was able to manage Katz. For me, Gary and Steve, Tom was like our big brother. We knew when Tom said something, it was from a good place."

Lisa McClellan, sister of former WBC and WBO middleweight titleholder Gerald "G-Man" McClellan, came in contact with Tom in 2002, when Teddy Blackburn won the BWAA Good Guy Award for his work with Gerald, who lives with the effects of a severe brain injury from his 1995 fight against Nigel Benn. Lisa and Gerald were traveling by train to the BWAA awards dinner in New York, and Gerbasi arranged to meet them midway in order to do a story on the siblings.

Gerbasi came on the train as a stranger and left as a family friend.

"Tom left from New York to meet us, and he probably rode 10, 12 hours with us," Lisa recalled. "He became family. That is how close we came through the years. Sonia called me to tell me Tom had passed. That was hard to hear. Tom was always with us. He always cared about the fighters. We bonded over our grandchildren. Tom's sense of humor will stay with me. He was a part of our Ring of Brotherhood Foundation. I was always afraid when Tom was in our meetings, because he didn't care what he said (laughs).

"Tom cared about the guys no one else cared about it. That was Tom."

Our friend.

Joseph Santoliquito is an award-winning sportswriter who has been working for Ring Magazine/RingTV.com since October 1997 and is the president of the Boxing Writers Association of America. Follow @JSantoliquito.

"When I think about Tom, one word comes to mind: dependability. As I rose through the ranks and reached the UFC, he was always there for us, regardless of the time of day."

"Tom always had a story, and he would preface a story by saying, 'Ya want to laugh.'"

TAKING ON THE WORLD

LONG ESTABLISHED AS A HOTBED FOR BOXING, JAPAN TAKES ITS SHOW ON THE ROAD TO RIYADH FOR RING V

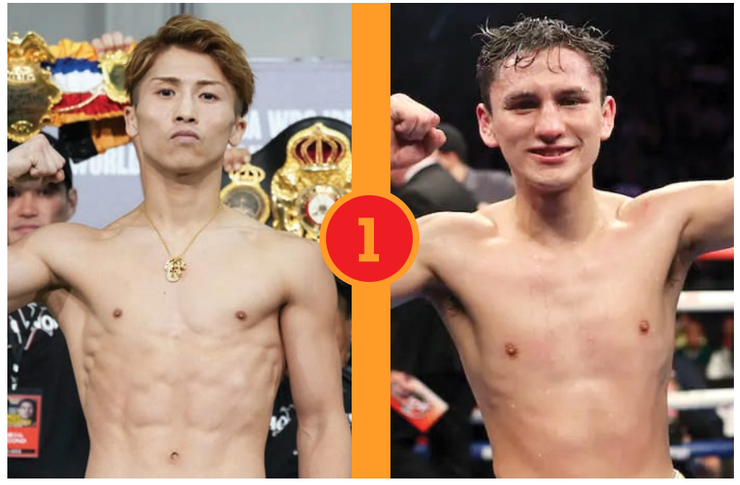
By Corey Erdman

Naoki Fukuda

Fans of the Japanese boxing scene living in the western world are used to having to work to keep up with their passions. Until somewhat recently, when more Japanese fighters have signed co-promotional deals with American companies, broadcasts of fights taking place in Japan were seldom available through, shall we say, conventional means. Following Japanese fighters on a granular level is the closest thing to the tape-trading scene that satiated hardcore fans of more obscure, non-PPV boxers in the 1990s and 2000s – now in the form of a whisper network showing where to find fights online, either live or after the fact.

But sometimes, talent can overcome the obstacles of an otherwise siloed subculture. The sweet science is enjoying perhaps its finest era in Japan's history, driven by some of the finest fighters in the world and a fairly thorough dominance of some of the lightest weight classes.

Historically, Japan's biggest fights happen during the holiday season, and on December 27, fans in the west will wake up – though not quite as early, as the event will take place in Riyadh – with the gift of Ring V: "Night of the Samurai" under the proverbial tree, featuring the very best Japan has to offer.



1. Naoya Inoue vs. Alan Picasso

Undisputed and Ring Magazine junior featherweight championship

It speaks to the level of talent of Terence Crawford and Oleksandr Usyk that Naoya Inoue isn't universally considered the best pound-for-pound fighter in the world. For several years now, Inoue has been considered, at worst, one of the three best fighters alive. If the parameters for pound-for-pound supremacy were simply "the eye test," it's Inoue's highlight tape that receives a perfect 10. A true boxing cyborg, Inoue is one of the most offensively gifted talents the sport has ever seen, a rare being who does not have to negotiate between power, speed and accuracy.

It's the latter attribute that Inoue honed in on most recently, delivering a dazzling boxing performance in nearly shutting out Murodjon Akhmadaliev in September to ensure his long-rumored bout with Picasso – and even bigger fights – remained on the schedule.

Picasso has been hovering at the top of the WBC rankings for over a year now awaiting this opportunity, most recently scoring a 10-round majority decision over Kyonosuke Kameda on the Manny Pacquiao-Mario Barrios undercard. Outside of boxing, Picasso was once considered a legitimate prospect to play professional soccer and is an aspiring neuroscientist whose ultimate dream is to win the Nobel Prize.

As a +1600 underdog coming into this fight on some sportsbooks, finding a way to defeat Inoue would be a Nobel-esque discovery in boxing terms. Luckily for Picasso, there have been glimmers of hope for prospective Inoue conquerors as of late. "The Monster" was dropped early by Luis Nery and Ramon Cardenas in recent bouts, and in the final 10 seconds of his win over Akhmadaliev, Inoue was noticeably buzzed once more.

In all likelihood, it's the Nery and Cardenas scares and perhaps that prospect of another jump in weight down the road that inspired the more judicious, defensively rooted approach Inoue adopted against Akhmadaliev. There is also the fact – one lost, given how soundly Inoue defeated him – that Akhmadaliev was considered by many to be the most legitimate threat to Inoue's throne and most challenging technical puzzle remaining in the division, a hypothesis verified if only briefly in the fight's waning moments.

The question is whether Inoue will choose to show the same restraint against Picasso, or whether he will return to his bombs-away style.

Either version of Inoue is a nightmare matchup for anyone, but it may be the more ferocious side that Picasso should wish for, as antithetical as that may sound. Picasso is a solid inside fighter whose power seems to have built over time, recently going on a streak of nine knockouts in 10 fights ahead of his career-best win over Azat "Crazy A" Hovhannisyan in 2024. Picasso has shown an excellent left hook throughout his career, creating torque with his lanky frame on the inside to land damaging shots.

Inoue's biggest weakness has been his own eagerness to hurt his opponent, entertain the fans, or both. Every so often, Inoue's facial expressions will express annoyance that his foe is still

standing, the gaze of a supremely gifted individual who cannot fathom that his superpowers haven't ended the night yet. It's in these moments that Inoue is most frightening, when he turns into the "mean little shit" that Mike Tyson described him as on his podcast, but also when he could be most susceptible. If Picasso can capitalize on one of those moments, it would be one of the most shocking and significant wins in Mexican boxing history. But if he looks to capitalize and misses, he could be another frame on the still growing but already legendary Inoue highlight reel.

2. Junto Nakatani vs. Sebastian Hernandez

Junto Nakatani has been in the shadow of Naoya Inoue for the past few years, making a similar trek up in weight and chasing his spot as the country's very best fighter. In another way, however, it is Nakatani's shadow that is now enveloping Inoue to a degree as the specter of a showdown between the two at the Tokyo Dome in 2026 looms. It would be the biggest fight in Japanese boxing history and overall maybe the country's biggest combat sports event ever.

Nakatani will move up to junior featherweight to face Sebastian Hernandez, Ring Magazine's No. 9-rated 122-pounder, continuing a trend of speedrunning through weight classes by jumping immediately into legitimate tests.

It will be a rare occasion in which Nakatani will not be the taller fighter in the ring, after enjoying the fruits of a 5-foot-8 frame that just three years ago was somehow able to weigh 112 pounds, where he first reigned as a titleholder. At the world level, he has been beyond destructive, going 10-0 with nine knockouts in world title fights. Nakatani added to that tally with perhaps his career-best win last time out, mauling Ryosuke Nishida in a mostly one-sided firefight to become the Ring champion and unify the IBF and WBC bantamweight titles.

In the 5-foot-9 Hernandez, Nakatani will find a fighter ready and capable of matching his 71.7 punch per round output. In his most recent outing, Hernandez overwhelmed the aforementioned and normally ultra-busy Hovhannisyan to score a 10-round decision, forcing "Crazy A" into a situation he has seldom, if ever, experienced, fighting with his back against the ropes for large portions of the later rounds.

In this way, the parallels between the main event and the co-main persist. Like Picasso, Hovhannisyan represents Hernandez's best win. But unlike Picasso, he's never fought in a scheduled 12-rounder. Divorced of any additional context, a graduating 10-round fighter trying to beat a pound-for-pound-level champion is an enormous ask. Oddsmakers have more faith in Hernandez, however, listing him at around a +610 underdog at the time of writing.

Given his relatively colossal frame, there has always been the assumption that Nakatani would venture north of 122 one day. However, every fighter eventually reaches the point at which former advantages are no longer a factor, and Nakatani will be presented with the biggest physical test of his career in this bout. Prior to the win over Nishida, Nakatani and coach Rudy Hernandez spoke of working on upping his punch volume even more (he's already one of the 10 most prolific champion-caliber volume punchers in the sport, according to CompuBox), perhaps understanding that as his size advantages diminish, he can compensate with additional effort.

An even busier version of Nakatani is a frightening proposition. That said, Nakatani has shown flickers of vulnerability as well over the years, his own compulsion to attack and exchange naturally opening him up for counters. In Hernandez, he'll encounter a terrific body-puncher, one who will no doubt target the midsection of Nakatani to see if he really has settled into 122 physically.

If Nakatani can answer that question in the affirmative, then "Big Bang" will in all likelihood get his opportunity at The Monster – a chance to begin a new era with him as the superior species.

3. Kenshiro Teraji vs. Willibaldo Garcia

IBF junior bantamweight title

To put into perspective how significant, albeit quietly so, the career of Kenshiro Teraji has been in his country: Two of the four all-Japanese

title-unification bouts in history have involved him. His first was the victory over Hiroto Kyoguchi to unify at junior flyweight, and he then seized a flyweight unification victory over Seigo Yuri Akui.

In order to beat Akui in what may still be the clubhouse leader for Fight of the Year at the time of publication, Teraji needed a final-round rally to produce a knockout. In real time, there were notes of it potentially being a last stand of sorts for "The Amazing Boy," as if he'd emptied the tank completely in a way that might not be replicable, at least at 112 pounds. Prior to the bout, he openly discussed wanting to move up in weight.

Instead, he chose to stay at 112 for one more fight and dropped a shocking decision to Ricardo Sandoval in July. While many observers felt that Teraji deserved the nod, if not for Joseph Gwilt's unusually wide 117-110 scorecard for Sandoval, there probably wouldn't have been mention of it being a "robbery." It was a close, competitive fight in which Sandoval was every bit as good as one of this era's very best on the night.

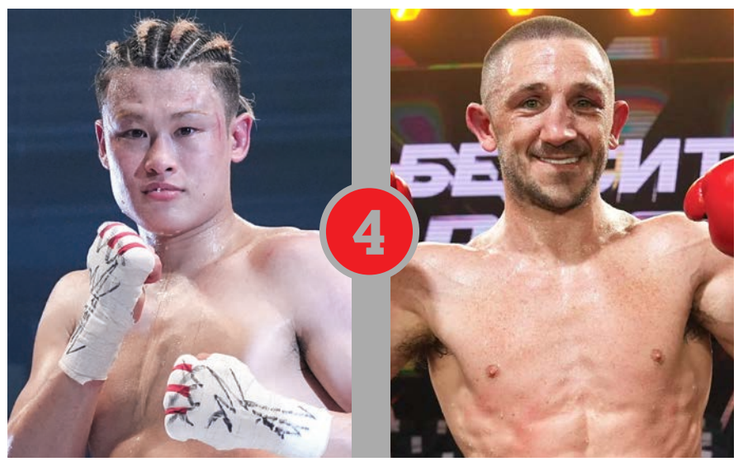
Though a win would've given Teraji a clean exit from the second division he ruled, it's fair to ask two questions: Did he overstay his welcome one fight too long? And regardless of what the answer to that is, has he also reached his physical peak? Even against Akui, Teraji was not able to "physically overwhelm" him in the way he'd vowed.

Now, Teraji will test the waters at 115 pounds against IBF titleholder Willibaldo Garcia, The Ring's No. 8-rated junior bantamweight. But if questions about a ticking clock are being whispered for Teraji, they're being spoken at full volume for Garcia, who capped off a feel-good story by winning a world title at the age of 35 after starting his career 1-3. Will that title-winning effort against Rene Calixto be his career peak, the gold watch reward for enduring the hard road, or does he have more left in the tank?

From a technical perspective, the fight may boil down to whether Garcia can neutralize or at least minimize damage from Teraji's lead hand. According to CompuBox, Teraji is the most prolific jabber in the sport, a rounding error away from pumping 40 jabs per round, which represents more than half of his offensive output overall. That jab also functions as his defense, allowing him to put up Top-5 defensive metrics as well, and that's even after tabulating an absolute war with Akui in which he was hit – and hit hard – plenty. Garcia's strength is in his steadfast resolve to continue applying pressure, and in his unorthodox approach. Garcia will wing wild right hands that sometimes just function as a decoy to get him to the inside where he can roughhouse, but they're thrown with enough conviction to be a true threat against lower-level opposition.

The last time Teraji came back after a loss, he avenged defeat against Masamichi Yabuki with a third-round knockout. He won't have immediate revenge on his mind this time, but something even more significant in the broader landscape: A win over Garcia would make Teraji a three-weight titleholder and introduce the mouth-watering possibility of Jesse "Bam" Rodriguez vs. The Amazing Boy.

4. Hayato Tsutsumi vs. James Dickens



Three fights ago, Hayato Tsutsumi did what no man had done for over nine years by stopping Rene Alvarado. In the bout before that, Tsutsumi came in heavy for his featherweight match against Anselmo Moreno, who was knocked out in three rounds. As a result of the infraction, the Japanese Boxing Commission suspended Tsutsumi, who moved up to 130 pounds for the Alvarado fight upon his return. Nonetheless, the 2016 World Youth amateur champion has compiled an impressive hit list in just eight pro fights, most recently defeating Jaime Arboleda and Qais Ashfaq, both by third-round stoppage.

His opponent, "Jazza" Dickens, finds himself in a near-identical situation as he was in last time out, when he shocked Olympic gold medalist Albert Batyrgaziev, pummeling and stopping him in four rounds.

Dickens showed some surprising pop in that bout, and he'll have another hittable opponent in front of him in Tsutsumi, who is not afraid of an exchange. Will the Batyrgaziev win prove to be the last hurrah for Dickens, or is it a late-career surge?

5. Reito Tsutsumi vs. Leobardo Quintana

Reito Tsutsumi will share the card with his older brother Hayato on this night as the two continue to travel eerily similar paths. Like his brother, Reito was a world amateur champion as a youth and competed in the same "senior" Worlds as his brother in 2021. Like Hayato, he waited until he was finished at university before focusing on the pro ranks.

The siblings have fought around the same divisions thus far, and though Hayato is further along in his development, it's Reito who is considered the better prospect, earning him status as a Ring Magazine ambassador and placement on three massive Riyadh Season undercards already. His next assignment is Mexicali's Leobardo "El Chino" Quintana, whose record stands at 12-1 (5 KOs).

This weight neighborhood is seemingly a constant battleground between Japan and Mexico, so if scouting reports prove to be true and Reito is indeed the next Japanese star-in-waiting, this should serve as an early preview for what's in store for him in the not-too-distant future.

6. Taiga Imanaga vs. Armando Martinez

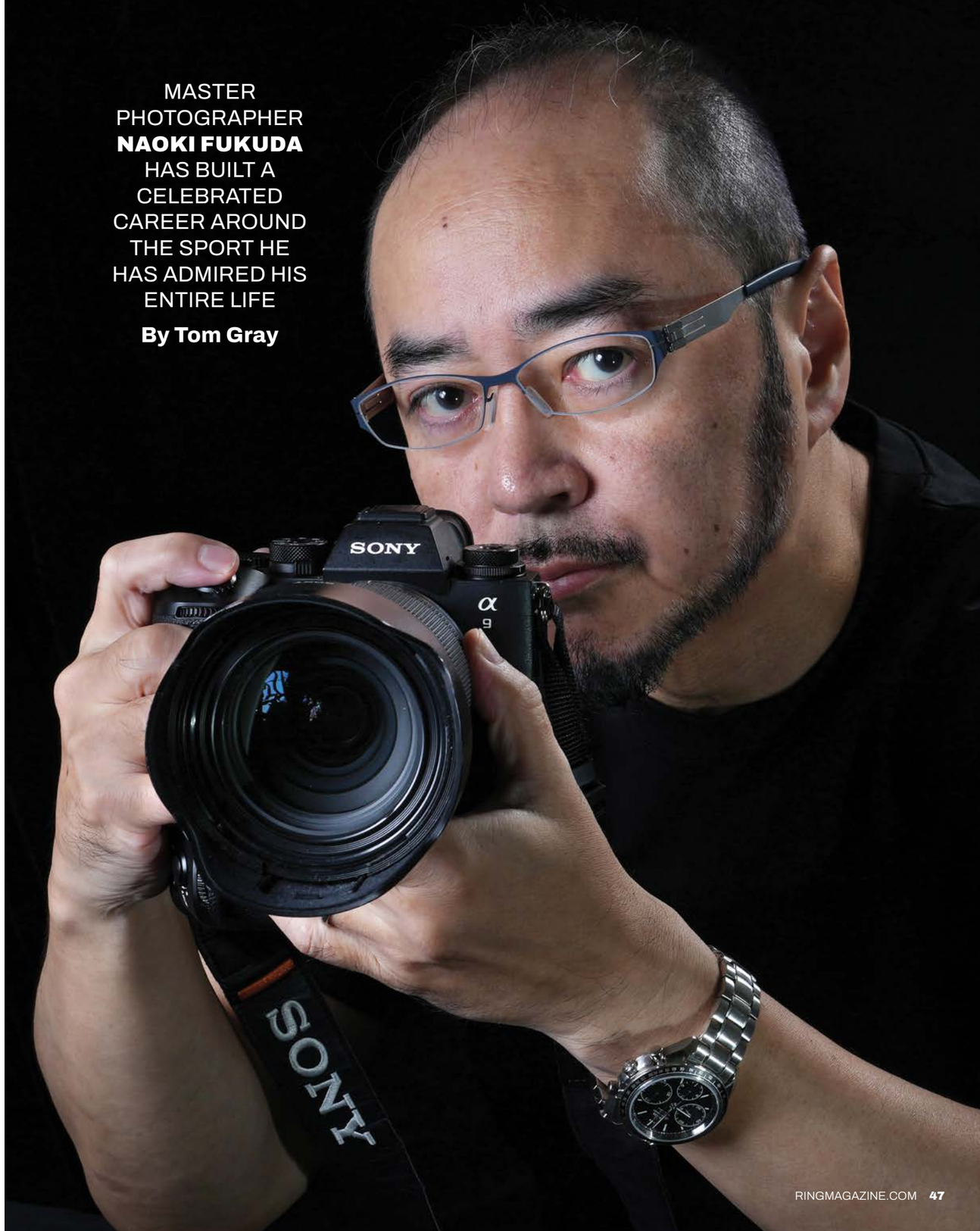
Unlike his countrymen on this card, Taiga Imanaga had an elongated amateur career by Japanese standards. Imanaga was 113-13 in the unpaid ranks, one of the best high school boxers in the history of a country where scholastic boxing is taken quite seriously.

In mid-September, the 26-year-old cruised to victory against Yudai Murakami, becoming the 66th Japanese (domestic) lightweight champion. He'll have a tough assignment in his graduating bout beyond domestic level as he takes on hard-hitting Cuban Armando Martinez. Martinez was second on the depth chart only to the great Lazaro Alvarez in the Cuban national amateur system before turning pro in 2021. RING

CHAMPION OF THE LENS

MASTER PHOTOGRAPHER **NAOKI FUKUDA** HAS BUILT A CELEBRATED CAREER AROUND THE SPORT HE HAS ADMIRED HIS ENTIRE LIFE

By Tom Gray



Acclaimed Japanese fight photographer Naoki Fukuda is arguably the best there is in his chosen field. In boxing parlance, this charming and unassuming man is undefeated, pound-for-pound rated and sure to retire as an all-time great. Honing his craft for five decades, Fukuda has snapped many of the greatest champions of the modern era and shows no signs of slowing down.

For anyone who believes that I'm waxing lyrical for no reason, let the stats and accomplishments speak for themselves. Fukuda has been recognized by the Boxing Writers Association of America 12 times in the past 15 years, with feature or action photography garnering him first place on four occasions. In 2024, he was also named Photographer of the Decade by the WBC.

His work is constantly in demand. Along with providing shots for The Ring and other international publications, Fukuda has established himself as Japan's official boxing photographer. He is the go-to lensman for the Japanese Boxing Commission and Teiken Promotions, as well as Amazon Prime whenever the streaming giant broadcasts boxing in his home country. When there's big-fight action in Japan, Fukuda is part of the tapestry and has the respect of the entire industry.

However, as successful and decorated as he's been, Fukuda, like many of the champions he's photographed over the years, has had to work hard to get to the top.

Born in Tokyo on July 15, 1965, Fukuda was the youngest of two children, having an older sister. The family business was lacquerware wholesale, which is the bulk selling of decorative dinnerware, boxes, furniture and other goods. Growing up, Naoki was extremely close to his grandfather, Shigeo, whose wish was for him to take over the business upon his retirement.

As it turned out, however, Naoki's grandfather also had a keen interest in photography and took pictures all over Europe. In the early 1970s, a Pentax camera was a high-quality, expensive piece of hardware, so when Shigeo handed down an older model to his grandson, he was off to a great start.

And destiny was calling when Naoki found his next passion.

"Back then, boxing was like soccer here now in Japan [in terms of popularity]," Fukuda told The Ring via translator Mizuka Koike. "Every household was watching boxing matches on TV. The likes of Guts Ishimatsu, [Koichi] Wajima and Kuniaki Shibata; all these guys were fighting.

"Boxing is such a hard sport, so Japan gave all the respect to professional boxers back then. I just fell in love with the sport."

Shortly thereafter, while in the seventh grade, Fukuda made a new friend named Teruyuki Kagawa, who would eventually become a famous actor. The pair were supposed to be studying at school, but the vast majority of their time was taken up studying boxing. Naoki produced self-made boxing newspapers for classmates, but the only person who showed serious interest in them was Teruyuki.

"Newspapers and magazines were the main sources for the sport, but we'd also visit a bookstore," Fukuda recalled with a smile. "We'd read all the stories, look at the pictures, and try to imagine how the fight went, like when [Alexis] Arguello beat [Diego] Alcala (KO 1).

"Videos were treasures back then. It was Teruyuki who would get fights from abroad. Anytime he did, we'd have a sleepover and watch them all. Even today, we still talk about boxing like crazy. We go abroad to see fights and still watch tapes of all the great fighters from the past."

Early on in his boxing journey, Fukuda's interest was mainly on Japanese warriors. However, all of that changed when arguably the greatest junior featherweight of all time ventured to "The Land of the Rising Sun" to take on a former world titleholder in January 1978.

"Wilfredo Gomez fought against Royal Kobayashi," remembered Fukuda, recalling what was Bazooka's second defense of the WBC 122-pound title. "During that match, which Kobayashi lost, Gomez landed the knockout punch going backwards. Up until that time, I saw Japanese fighters winning by coming forward. What Gomez did looked unusual; he stepped back and countered [with a left hook], which made me realize just how artistic boxing could be. That was when I fell in love with fighters from abroad."

While in middle school, Fukuda became aware of Kazumichi Hayashi, who was a boxing photographer based in Los Angeles. To that point, the fledgling young photographer had no idea that pictures, magazines and the sport he loved could be blended into a career. This proved to be a crucial turning point.

Fukuda pursued his education and set himself the goal of becoming a full-time fight photographer. He graduated from Dokkyo University in 1989.

One year earlier, while still helping with the family business, Fukuda began working for Boxing Magazine in Japan. The publication already employed photographers, so writing

and editing would be his only duties at that point. The first issue that he worked on featured legendary five-weight world champion Thomas "The Hitman" Hearns.

Now working in the boxing business, Naoki got married and was delighted to introduce a baby daughter into the world. However, life was far from easy. While his grandfather's business had been very successful, with two large buildings erected in Tokyo, Naoki's parents were not financially prudent and ran up colossal debts of approximately $7 million plus interest. Instead of taking ownership, they fled and left Naoki, his new wife, and his grandfather to pay that money back.

When Shigeo sadly passed away in 2000, at the age of 92, Naoki and his wife sold the business to help clear a large portion of the debt. Instead of being financially secure, the couple was left with nothing. Initially living at his wife's parents' house in Japan, Fukuda gambled and bought himself a one-way ticket to Las Vegas to pursue his dream of becoming a photographer. In September 2001, he traveled there alone and had to save to bring his family to the U.S. at a later date.

Slowly but surely, Fukuda began to make his mark. Las Vegas was essentially boxing heaven, with several events being held up and down The Strip every other week. Japanese broadcaster WOWOW and several other outlets commissioned Fukuda to work on big fights before he eventually joined forces with "The Bible of Boxing."

"I began doing work for Ring Magazine in 2008," said Fukuda, who still provides us with hundreds of images per year. "I really looked up to the publication and admired it a lot. At high school, I'd worn a T-shirt and a hat with 'The Ring' written on them.

"For years, I couldn't get credentialed for fights. [Editor-in-Chief] Doug Fischer, [former Editors-in-Chief] Nigel Collins and Michael Rosenthal were very influential in making me official. I really appreciated that."

Things were looking up when another knockout blow landed with devastating force. In 2009, in Las Vegas, Fukuda was in his car with his family in the back when they were struck by a driver who was under the influence. It was a devastating crash, which left his daughter in a coma for three days. Having brought his family to the U.S., Naoki was riddled with guilt but had to stay hungry to give them the life they deserved. Thankfully, his daughter made a full recovery.

"The following year, Timothy Bradley fought Luis Carlos Abregu, and the photograph I took received an award from the BWAA," said Fukuda. "From that moment on, my life changed in the U.S. From there, I won several awards."

For the uninitiated, positioning oneself on a ring apron and taking pictures of two people throwing punches might sound like an easy job. That is most certainly not the case. Producing the level of excellence that Fukuda does consistently requires years of dedication and practice.

"My eye is always on the weaker fighter from the stronger opponent's view," revealed Fukuda. "I see things through the eyes of the fighter who has the advantage. If the fight is super-close, my eye will change from one fighter to the other. I try to be ahead of the punches that are thrown.

"A lot of times, people will photograph Canelo and use the [burst mode] when Canelo throws the punch. What you should do is photograph the boxer who is being punched. To do that, you need to be with Canelo always. The only thing I don't know is which punch will be landing, so I need to observe very closely."

In 2016, Fukuda decided that he would return to Japan. After covering the Floyd Mayweather vs.

"Ever since I fell in love with boxing, my feelings for the sport have never changed."

Manny Pacquiao superfight the year before, the now multi-award-winning photographer formed the opinion that the boxing landscape was changing in the U.S. The number of shows in Las Vegas had dropped, and there was as much priority on celebrity attendance as there was on the action taking place in the ring.

"I'd turned 50 years old and felt I could use my connections and friendships that I'd gained in the States to contribute to the Japanese boxing business and make it bigger," said Fukuda. "Years ago, not many people were interested in getting boxing photography from Japan. Luckily, when I came back, we had [Naoya] Inoue, [Ryota] Murata, Kenshiro [Teraji], plus [Shinsuke] Yamanaka was still fighting.

"Naoya, from my perspective, is a pure Japanese boxer. He has the jab, the one-two, the body shots, and he has a well-balanced core. I used to watch Latino boxers, and I'm a big fan of them, but Naoya is very much a fundamentally sound Japanese boxer. People may think 'fundamentally sound' means that he's boring, but he's not. He's got power, technique and stamina. He is first class. It's really nice that he's being recognized in world boxing."

It's not only Inoue, the undisputed junior featherweight champion, who is finally being recognized. As the years have passed, Fukuda has transitioned from undistinguished to critically acclaimed in the field of boxing photography. It's been a remarkable journey with many big chapters still ahead.

"Ever since I fell in love with boxing, my feelings for the sport have never changed," said Fukuda, who turned 60 years old in July. "Teruyuki and I can talk on the phone about boxing for seven hours straight.

"With my photography, it's only my outlook that's changed slightly. In the States, it was a battle with editors, magazine readers, maybe even my environment, or other photographers. Now it's different. Photographing fights now is entirely a battle with my inner self. Can I take photos that I'm satisfied with? Can I get the results that I'm aiming for? If I can give my own photos a passing grade, I can confidently share them with the world."

And for that, anyone who comes across Fukuda's work in the boxing business should be very grateful. RING

FUN FACT

So enthused was Naoki about boxing that he trained in a boxing gym for three or four years. While he now claims that he had "no guts," Fukuda sparred with future WBC junior flyweight titleholder German Torres on several occasions.

PROSPECT WATCH:

Yuga Fujiki

By Daisuke Sugiura

Japanese boxing is thriving. Naoya Inoue, Junto Nakatani, Kenshiro Teraji and Kazuto Ioka, among other standouts, have established themselves as elite champions, bringing the nation's fight scene to global prominence.

Yet much of that success has been concentrated in the lower weight classes, as Japan currently has no world titleholders at featherweight or above.

When Jin Sasaki challenged WBO welterweight titleholder Brian Norman Jr. on June 19, the Japanese slugger was stopped in the fifth round. Later this year, on November 14, Andy Hiraoka will attempt to dethrone WBA junior welterweight titleholder Gary Antuanne Russell, but few see him as the favorite.

There have been rare exceptions – former IBF junior lightweight titleholder Kenichi Ogawa; Takanori Hatakeyama, who captured the WBA junior lightweight and lightweight titles; and Ryota Murata, who held the WBA middleweight crown – but their reigns were short-lived.

Now, however, a new fighter who may change everything is emerging. His name is Yuga Fujiki, a 17-year-old prodigy from Kokoku High School in Osaka – a fighter already being hailed

Naoki Fukuda

as a once-in-a-generation talent.

Even Hideyuki Ohashi, the famed promoter and head of Ohashi Gym – home of Naoya Inoue – is astonished.

"I've been around boxing for 50 years, but this kid is really on another level," Ohashi says.

Fujiki's amateur resume is already staggering. Last year, fighting as a lightweight, he won both the Inter-High School Championship and the Under-19 World Championships in Colorado. In 2025, he claimed the national high school selection tournament at lightweight, then moved up to light welterweight (141 pounds) and swept the Inter-High and the National Sports Festival to complete a triple crown. Across nine bouts in those two tournaments, he scored nine straight RSC (Referee Stopped Contest) victories – a level of dominance rarely seen in the amateur ranks. His overall record stands at 45-0 with 32 RSCs, and he has already stated that he has no interest in the Olympics, instead planning to turn professional in February of next year.

Born in Osaka in 2007, Fujiki is the son of a former professional boxer. He began training at the age of 7 under his father at Oboshi Gym. Now a high school senior, he belongs to his school's boxing club while also training regularly at the Ohashi Gym.

Anyone who watches Fujiki fight can see what sets him apart: an aggressive, attacking style built on power, precision and composure. His sharp jab is reminiscent of Gennadiy Golovkin's thudding left stick, while his devastating right hand and punishing body shots evoke images of Inoue himself.

"My favorite fighters are Roman Gonzalez and Naoya Inoue," Fujiki says. "I probably watch more videos of Gonzalez, and I try to model some of my movement on him. Over time, that's evolved into my own style – I feel like I'm really becoming the boxer I want to be."

Veteran boxing photographer Naoki Fukuda says Fujiki is the most impressive fighter he's seen at that level.

"I've been covering amateur boxing in Japan since 1990," Fukuda notes. "Physically, he might be the most complete fighter I've ever seen. He's strong, he attacks openings naturally and without hesitation, and every punch he throws carries power. His defense is subtle – minimal body movement, great blocking – and in close range, he throws body shots and uppercuts that are [surprising] for a high schooler. Even in the amateurs, where knockdowns are rare, he finds ways to make them happen. It's boxing that transcends the amateur level."

Fujiki's reputation isn't built only on his official matches – his sparring sessions have become the stuff of legend. Throughout junior high and high school, he sparred with professionals including former world titleholder Ryo Miyazaki and ex-OPBF titlist Riku Kano. Rumor has it he's even dropped national-level pros in the gym, though names are withheld to protect reputations. Recently, he sparred with former unified champion Marlon Tapales, who was in Japan to prepare Inoue for his fight with Murodjon "MJ" Akhmadaliev.

"Yes, I sparred Tapales recently," Fujiki says. "He was really strong and skilled – one of the best I've faced so far. I've also sparred with guys like [Japanese junior featherweight titleholder] Toshiki Shimomachi and [former Youth champion] Ryuya Tsugawa. But Tapales was on another level."

Yet even for this rising star, there was one sparring session that left a lasting impression – an encounter with "The Monster" himself.

"I got to do a light spar with Naoya Inoue last December, when he was preparing for Sam Goodman," Fujiki recalls (the fight was eventually canceled). "It was like I was being made to throw punches, like he was controlling my movement completely. His speed, his power, his footwork – everything was incredible. You can learn just by watching him. But he did tell me after my sparring session with another fighter, 'You've got a good jab.' That really gave me confidence."

For all the praise surrounding him, Fujiki remains grounded. While most teenagers his age spend their time hanging out with friends or playing games, he's utterly devoted to boxing.

"Boxing is my youth," Fujiki says with a smile. "After a fight, I might go eat with my teammates or friends, but that's about it. I don't really feel like going out or traveling. Even when I finish a tournament, I'm back in the gym within a few days. I just love boxing. I actually look forward to waking up in the morning so I can train."

When asked what it is about boxing that fascinates him so much, Fujiki becomes animated, as if talking about a first love.

"It's one-on-one, but there's so much happening between two fighters that only we can understand – the distance, the feints, the rhythm in those moments when neither is throwing. That tension, that space – only the two of us in the ring can feel it. And when the crowd senses that and gets excited, that's the best feeling in the world."

Some observers have even suggested that he's ahead of where Inoue was at the same age. Ohashi, who knows both fighters intimately, doesn't dismiss the comparison.

Naoki Fukuda

Fujiki aims to replicate Naoya Inoue's success but at higher weights.

"It's hard to compare them," Ohashi says. "Naoya was incredible, of course. But in terms of overall completeness, Fujiki might actually be ahead. These two are both masterpieces. Among all the high schoolers who've turned pro, Fujiki might be the strongest ever. He's a true treasure of Japanese boxing."

What makes Fujiki particularly special is that he represents a breakthrough for Japan in the higher weight divisions. Standing 170 cm (about 5-foot-7), he's recently competed in the 141-pound division and is expected to fight between lightweight and welterweight as a professional – a range where Japan has long struggled to produce world-class talent.

Issei Nakaya, head of Hachioji Nakaya Gym – which developed Jin Sasaki, Nihito Arakawa and Makoto Fuchigami – believes Fujiki could be the one to shatter that "higher weight wall."

"If there's a Japanese boxer who can truly break through at lightweight or above, it's him," Nakaya says. "There are two stages to that wall. The first is simply reaching a world-class level – my fighter Sasaki is there now. But Fujiki has the potential to go beyond that, to the next stage. In other words, he could do in the lightweight or welterweight divisions what Naoya Inoue has done in the lighter ones. Not just win a title, but become one of the very best fighters in the world."

Ohashi echoes that belief.

"Naoya has already accomplished just about everything possible in the lower weights," he says. "Of course, he still has big challenges ahead, but he's done incredible things for Japanese boxing. The next step for us as a nation is to produce fighters who can compete – and win – at lightweight, welterweight and above. And I believe Fujiki is the one. Those divisions are incredibly tough, but with his discipline, strength and mindset, he has a real chance to break through. He can carry the future of Japanese boxing and open a new path for the heavier divisions."

Fujiki will turn 18 on Christmas Day – a fitting gift to Japanese boxing. Expectations around him are enormous, but so is his own ambition.

"Having someone like Naoya Inoue so close inspires me," Fujiki says. "If I'm not aiming for that level, there's no point in doing this. I want to win world titles in multiple divisions like he did, become a two-division undisputed champion and be recognized as the pound-for-pound No. 1 fighter in the world."

The possibilities seem endless. The sky's the limit for him. For the first time in decades, Japan may have found a fighter capable of conquering not just the lighter divisions, but the lightweights and beyond – a young man whose rise could reshape the future of Japanese boxing. RING

THE COMEBACK KID

WITH **MAX KELLERMAN** BACK IN THE BROADCASTER SEAT WITH *INSIDE THE RING*, BOXING HAS REGAINED ONE OF ITS MOST ENTHUSIASTIC VOICES

By Joseph Santoliquito

He came at us more than two decades ago like a kid out of high school, his hair spiked with gel, wearing a black leather jacket as an analyst on *ESPN2's Friday Night Fights*. He took his share of derision from the old guard over his boyish exuberance, but it was all rooted in his childhood love: boxing.

In time, Max Kellerman grew on all of us. The leather jacket went, along with the gel. His opinions grew in significance. His appearance at ringside added importance to fights. His face became synonymous with boxing.

Kellerman has now brought his crossover credibility to a new platform, *Inside The Ring*, with respected boxing reporter Mike Coppinger along with former NFL player and hardcore fan LeSean McCoy, covering the sport each Monday at 2 p.m. ET on DAZN.

"This is the type of show boxing has always needed and never had," Kellerman said. "The Ring has been the sport's publication of record for over 100 years, and with the new vision for the brand, it is clearly leading boxing into the future."

Kellerman returns to the sport after being a ringside commentator for HBO's *World Championship Boxing* for 13 years (2005-2018), and as one of ESPN's most knowledgeable talk show hosts on *SportsNation* and *First Take*. Since June 2023, when he'd been a part of ESPN's massive network-wide layoffs, Kellerman had been waiting for his chance to resurface.

He feels he has his answer with *Inside The Ring*, produced by Peyton and Eli Manning's Omaha Productions, the same media company behind ESPN's live *Monday Night Football with Peyton and Eli* broadcasts, as well as the *Places* series and Netflix's *Quarterback* and *Receiver* docuseries.

Boxing missed Max Kellerman.

The Ring: What is your ultimate goal and vision for *Inside The Ring*?
Max Kellerman: To be a part of a great show that entertains and informs boxing fans and maybe gets some casual fans more interested in the sport.

The Ring: Moving forward, how involved will you be with ringside commentating? Was Canelo-Crawford a one-off?
MK: Can't get too into the details at the moment, but I plan to be back ringside going forward.

The Ring: What attracted you to *Inside The Ring*?
MK: I was intrigued because it is unlike any boxing show before, sort of like an *Inside the NBA* for boxing. I had been away from TV for two years and I was waiting for the right kind of show to come back with. The first call I got that I thought "yeah, I want to do this" was from Dana White. Dana told me he was finally getting into boxing, and he wanted me to be his guy. Now, Dana and I have been talking for over 20 years, because he originally wanted me on the UFC broadcasts when Zuffa bought it [in 2001]. I was interested, because I was into the UFC, but I was at ESPN at the time, and back then, especially, ESPN would not relax exclusivity in their contracts. But Dana and I spoke for years about doing something.

Anyway, when HBO went off the air, that level of production in boxing was not replaced. It was just gone. And I really didn't want to do anything in boxing that didn't have those standards. When I heard Dana was going to be involved, I knew the quality of the event and of the broadcast would be extraordinary. And then the fact that Turki Alalshikh was involved, and I'd been watching him from afar the past several years, and had been really impressed by his genuine passion for boxing, and by his commitment to it. And then Nick Khan was involved. Nick has been a good friend for 20-plus years, and he is a brilliant guy. Just look at what he's done with the WWE. So it was the moment I was waiting for in boxing. That was the call I had been looking forward to for years.

The Ring: You are a future Hall of Famer who gives boxing relevance to the mainstream sports fan. Do you see yourself in that role of carrying the torch?

I was intrigued because it is unlike any boxing show before, sort of like an *Inside the NBA* for boxing. I had been away from TV for two years and I was waiting for the right kind of show to come back with.

MK: I appreciate the kind words. I am part of a team led by Turki, Dana and Nick. What I notice when I'm in a room with any permutation of them is everyone knows boxing and, more importantly, loves it. Unlike different iterations of power brokers in the sport through the years, these guys actually love it and want to make it better. Behind closed doors, they talk about many of the same subjects boxing fans have geeked out about for years, mostly how to grow it and get it back to the mainstream. The people behind what's happening now are an A-team who sought each other out and have created this momentum toward a new day in boxing. I'm very happy to be a part of it.

The Ring: What do these guys bring?
MK: They want good fights. It's that simple. Let's look at the Terence Crawford-Canelo Alvarez fight. Think about the undercard; they were all 50-50 fights. The B-side did just as well that night as the A-side. There was a draw in the Christian Mbilli-Lester Martinez fight, right? Mbilli came in as the favorite, and it ended in a draw. Jermaine Franklin, B-side, got a decision over Ivan Dychko. Crawford's guy, Steven Nelson, was upset by B-side Raiko Santana, which I thought was a premature stoppage, and in the main event, B-side Terence Crawford beat Canelo Alvarez. That was a great card.

There you saw Zuffa Boxing holding a card in conjunction with Riyadh Season, and it was an extravaganza at a stadium. When was the last time you heard this: They got a college football game moved off that September 13 date and moved to Week 0 so they could have Allegiant Stadium on a Saturday night? You had the kind of memorabilia being sold there that you would normally see at an NFL game.

When you think about boxing, it is very much a mom-and-pop operation. Even the big boxing operators, they have a little suite of offices. When they go out of business, the office suite is gone. They put everything in one van and that's that. (laughs) If you go to the UFC headquarters, it's a multimillion dollar campus. It looks like a giant, sprawling airplane hangar. They have gates and security guards, and dozens of employees bustling around. That's never existed in boxing. That actual institution-building know-how is entering boxing now and trying to create the same thing that MMA now has in the form of the UFC — something that grows and lasts.

Netflix provided wall-to-wall coverage for Canelo vs. Crawford.

The Ring: Was it frustrating the two years you were away from TV?
MK: My big question was how long would I have to wait for the right opportunity. Something that would be exciting to be involved with.

The Ring: Were you afraid you wouldn't get the chance to do boxing commentary again?
MK: I was depressed that boxing in this country was disintegrating. In every generation, they lament the slow death of boxing. In this case, though, it hit a critical state. It was completely off linear TV. The average sports fan does not know anything about boxing anymore. Nothing. Zuffa bought the UFC for $2 million in 2001. Dana talked about it recently when he was featured on *60 Minutes*. They recently signed a $7.7 billion deal with Paramount. When you start talking about numbers like that, you're talking about league numbers. That's NFL, NBA, MLB – huge league numbers. There is no deal like that in boxing.

When the lucrative deals come in boxing, instead of investing the money back into the sport, promoters pocket the money and think the deal that they are getting is the cash-out. They think, "Now we're in the money, and now we can underdeliver because we've made it." No! Dana White never thinks that way. He puts the money right back into the product.

For example, look at what happened during COVID-19. Combat sports had a golden opportunity. For football, you would need hundreds of tests to stage an event. In combat sports, you didn't. There are far fewer participants. What does Dana do? He immediately created *Fight Island* and starts staging events. Boxing had a chance to stage events.

SYE WILLIAMS

David Becker

They could have staged fights in front of a totally captive American audience. What happened? Nothing much. UFC and Dana White beat them to it. But now boxing is in a position to get to a place it hasn't been in a very long time.

The Ring: This new show, by the tone of your voice, by the way you are talking, is this a new, reinvigorated Max?

MK: In my downtime, I got a chance to be with my kids, take them to school, spend time with my family. The stuff you always hear people talk about when they're not working. I was able to do the things parents like to do. And it was awesome. I don't know if I was ever not invigorated. What you are hearing is my excitement about the future of the sport that I love the most.

Kellerman plans to be back at ringside on a regular basis.

The Ring: But we both know how this sport can beat you down and stomp on your love for it. It is a sport that is tough to love. Fight fans have been smacked around. You were there at ground zero when HBO fell, followed by boxing on Showtime. Could we see a renaissance with the current power brokers?

MK: I think you will see that it could be better than ever. When I was a kid, the way it worked was basically the minor leagues of boxing were on cable TV, the major leagues were on the broadcast networks on the weekends – CBS, NBC, ABC. Back then, starting at 4 p.m. Eastern, you would at least see Rocky Lockridge, Freddie Pendleton, Bobby Czyz, Cornelius Boza-Edwards, Bobby Chacon – so many real good, top-level fighters. And then of course guys who would go on to be legends, like Tommy Hearns, Alexis Arguello, Julio Cesar Chavez, Sugar Ray Leonard and that level of fighter. They played their regular-season games on the regular networks. The winners of those fights fought in the playoffs on HBO – premium pay cable – and the winner of those fights fought in the World Series or Super Bowl on closed-circuit and pay-per-view TV.

What happened was, by the time I was on HBO, HBO was basically tasked with hosting the regular season *and* the playoffs, because the broadcast networks went away from boxing and the basic cable networks weren't spending real money on it. And the equivalent of the World Series or Super Bowl was on pay-per-view. So the bigger the fight, the fewer people saw it.

When I was at ESPN, their budget was $5 million a year for boxing. That was not major league boxing. It was AAA boxing. HBO was responsible for the sport in North America for putting on everything. When ESPN was spending $5 million per year, HBO was spending 90! But because they had to pick up the slack due to the absence of the broadcast networks, the quality on HBO was inevitably diluted. Still great, but diluted. The goal with Zuffa Boxing is that it will take care of the regular season, and those winners will graduate to Riyadh Season in the playoffs.

The Ring: That's uber encouraging. What is the plan?

MK: Dana revealed it. He wants the Zuffa series to produce contenders from 50-50 fights, with the winners getting to the next level. That would be Riyadh Season. Turki and Dana will be investing back into boxing. That's why I am excited about where boxing is going. I am confident in the plan because it makes sense, and because of the track record of the people involved.

In the *60 Minutes* piece on Dana, the interviewer pointed out that not all UFC fighters are rich and pointed out that some fighters make as little as $12,000 a fight. Most make a lot more, of course. But in boxing? What's the minimum? It ain't $12,000. It's a lot less. There is a much larger middle class in UFC, and "middle class" by the standards of a major sport is a nice living. So we're looking at a situation now where rather than everyone trying to juice every cent out of every fight, there is a league in place, and a plan in place, and a long-term vision in place so that each fight is not a going-out-of-business sale; it's part of a continuum in a growing sport.

In my downtime, I got a chance to be with my kids, take them to school, spend time with my family. The stuff you always hear people talk about when they're not working. I was able to do the things parents like to do.

The Ring: How different is this from your ESPN days?

MK: It is like the culmination of a dream from those days. I mean, I have receipts I've posted on social media showing how long I've been talking about The Ring. It's over 23 years now. I was talking about The Ring ratings and the Ring champions – and refusing to mention the sanctioning bodies – long before I was paid by The Ring. Literally decades before. Check my Twitter. The Ring brand has of course now been bought by a deep-pocketed boxing fan who wants to revitalize the sport and use the Ring brand to help do it. So it's like a dream come true for me just as a boxing fan. And boxing fans are going to get commentary every week, something that has not been around since *Friday Night Fights*.

The Ring: Do you and Mike have free rein to cover controversial subjects in the boxing world?

MK: Of course. I have been specifically told by Turki that if I don't agree with something he does, he wants to hear about it on the air. We have free rein on everything in boxing. And I mean everything. Turki took me aside to make sure I understood that. That's the kind of show he wants. It's music to my ears. Now the culture of boxing is such that it sometimes feels like you are not doing your job in the press if you're not generally negative. But my goal is to treat people fairly. Doesn't mean that I am always going to say good things about the people we cover. But it does mean that most of the coverage isn't going to be downing the sport. We have had the sense from boxing people for far too long that they did not love boxing. But I love boxing, and I'm with a group of people who really love it too. RING

Joseph Santoliquito is an award-winning sportswriter who has been working for Ring Magazine/RingTV.com since October 1997 and is the president of the Boxing Writers Association of America. Follow @JSantoliquito.

CRUISER CONTROL

AUSTRALIAN STAR **JAI OPETAIA** IS THE WORLD'S LEADING CRUISERWEIGHT, BUT SECURING UNIFICATION BOUTS CONTINUES TO BE A SOURCE OF REAL FRUSTRATION

By Michael Rosenthal

Jai Opetaia seemed overwhelmed when he found himself standing between two all-time greats – Roy Jones Jr. and Lennox Lewis – before a segment of the *Inside The Ring* show during Canelo Alvarez-Terence Crawford fight week in Las Vegas.

The unbeaten cruiserweight titleholder lives in Gold Coast, Australia, which is almost 8,000 miles and a world away from the epicenter of the sport in the United States. He simply doesn't rub elbows with boxing royalty Down Under.

And then he did, which still leaves him flabbergasted.

"These guys were like my homework at school," said Opetaia, who was in Sin City for the first time as an established fighter. "My dad (Tapu, who is also his trainer) made me watch videos of them as I was learning to box, the way they moved, the way they fought. Lennox Lewis was one of the best of his generation.

Claudio Squeo succumbed to Opetaia's attacks after suffering a broken jaw in the fifth round.

Chris Hyde

"It wasn't just about meeting them. It was the way they both showed respect toward me. That meant a lot. I think people in America, the U.K., around Europe, they experience things like that. It's normal for them to get that kind of respect. People in Australia? Pacific Islanders? It doesn't happen often.

"It's difficult to put into words how that made me feel."

Why wouldn't the Hall of Famers show Opetaia respect? He might be well on his way to becoming one of them, a generational talent, although he has significant challenges ahead. That includes luring his reluctant 200-pound rivals into the ring and at some point moving up to face the big boys at heavyweight.

First things first, though. The 2012 Olympian, a complete boxer with heavyweight power, is generally considered the best cruiserweight in the world after defeating Mairis Briedis by a unanimous decision to win the Ring championship in 2022. He has successfully defended it six times, along with four defenses of the IBF title he currently holds.

Opetaia (28-0, 22 KOs) wants to leave no doubt by becoming undisputed champion, however. The problem is that the other top 200-pounders have thus far failed to cooperate, at least from his perspective. He's scheduled to face mandatory challenger Huseyin Cinkara (23-0, 19 KOs) on December 6 at Gold Coast Convention and Exhibition Centre in Broadbeach, a fight he is taking seriously but a mismatch on paper.

He'd rather be fighting WBA and WBO titleholder Gilberto Ramirez, who has expressed interest in facing Opetaia in a unification bout but "is asking for crazy money," according to Opetaia's manager, Mick Francis. And Ramirez is currently recovering from shoulder surgery, which rules him out for now anyway.

That leaves WBC beltholder Badou Jack, a 41-year-old who might be more interested in collecting as much money as possible than stepping into a lion's den at this stage of his otherwise excellent career.

Of course, Opetaia understands his sport is called prizefighting for a reason. At the same time, he doesn't understand the mindset of those who avoid genuine challenges for business or other reasons. He wants to demonstrate in the ring that he's king of his division. And the only way to do that is to face opponents with the best chance of beating him.

That would be Ramirez, Jack, Chris Billam-Smith and possibly David Benavidez if the 175-pounder moves up to 200. Opetaia doesn't have kind words for those whose primary motivation is money.

"If you want to be undisputed, there has to be sacrifices – *has* to be. I'm willing to take pay cuts, willing to do the things that make fights get over the line. They aren't."

"I'm happy where I am," Opetaia said. "At the same time, I want more. I want to be chasing unification fights. I feel like the other world champions have a different idea about proving they're the best. They're hiding from the fight; they're avoiding it. They should want to prove they're the best. Instead, they're chasing big paydays.

"If you want to be undisputed, there has to be sacrifices – *has* to be. I'm willing to take pay cuts, willing to do the things that make fights get over the line. They aren't. And it speaks volumes about what they really want, which is getting a quick payday and then leaving. It's like they're holding the belts for ransom. If they believe they can beat me, why not take the fight?

"They're taking mandatory fights, fighting other people for half the money they'd get fighting me. It's still not enough. Knowing this could be their last payday. That's what's stopping them."

And, perhaps ironically, Opetaia is convinced he'll get what the others appear to be pursuing: "If I stick to my guns, continue to chase my dreams, I believe the money will come anyway."

Opetaia was asked to provide his dream scenario at cruiserweight and he quickly transitioned from frustrated to animated. First a victory in his mandatory on December 6, then the winner of Jack's title defense against Noel Mikaelian on December 13, then Ramirez, assuming he has fully recovered from his surgery, then perhaps Benavidez, which Opetaia believes would be a compelling matchup … and then he stopped himself.

He was beginning to sound arrogant, as if these rivals are bowling pins he could easily topple and not genuine threats to him. That's not who he wants to be. He respects Jack, Ramirez, Benavidez and any other championship-level fighter who is willing to step into the ring with him.

He said he simply believes that none of the above can beat him if he's fully prepared physically and mentally, which reveals both his confidence and professionalism.

"The way I'm talking about these fights, it sounds like they're easy fights," he said. "I believe these are very hard fights. I don't believe any of them are walkovers. I believe I have to train hard, come in at the best of my ability to win. … If I train properly, if I execute my game plan on fight night, if I'm ready for 12 rounds of war, then I'll get my hand raised."

He just needs the opportunities. And there's hope, according to Francis. Opetaia's career-long adviser actually paints a bleak picture of the situation

himself. He said both Ramirez and Jack are pricing themselves out of potential showdowns with the imposing Aussie, which, as Opetaia said, is the same as saying they don't want the fight.

Francis doesn't know what will change so that Opetaia will get the opportunities to realize his goal of becoming undisputed champion. What he does know is that he has the right person in his corner, Turki Alalshikh of Riyadh Season, who he said expects the unification fights to happen next year. And, as Francis said, "When Turki wants things to happen, they usually happen."

"It's a battle," Francis went on. "If it were easy, it'd already be done. … What we need to do is trust the system, trust boxing royalty and persevere."

That's exactly what Opetaia plans to do: persevere. He's steadfast in his desire to hold the Ring and all four sanctioning body belts at 200 pounds, which he envisions will be a significant element of his legacy. And while he admits the process of making the necessary fights can be infuriating and won't wait around forever, he's in no hurry to take the next step.

He's only 30 years old, a pup in heavyweight years. One of the greatest cruiserweights-turned-heavyweights in history, Oleksandr Usyk, made his heavyweight debut at 32 and went on to secure Hall of Fame credentials in the sport's glamour division.

Opetaia has time. That's why he's baffled by the outside pressure to make his move sooner rather than later.

"I'm not there yet," Opetaia responded when he was asked whether he thinks about giving up on his goal at 200 pounds. "There's still a long time to go. Think about it: Once I go up to heavyweight, I'm not coming back down. And the thing about the heavyweight division is that it's not going anywhere. I can go up at any time, next year or in three, four years.

"I don't understand why they're rushing me. I'm 30. I feel like people are pushing me to do this on their time, not mine."

Of course, it WILL happen. And when it does, he wants to do it properly.

Moving from 200 pounds to heavyweight – especially in an age of super heavyweights like Anthony Joshua and Tyson Fury – is not a matter of slapping on a few pounds and then jumping into the ring with a contender or champion.

Opetaia will have to work closely with a nutritionist and conditioning coach to add weight intelligently and gradually. He understands that the transition is a painstaking process, one that could play a significant role in whether he succeeds or fails at the next level.

Usyk, who is 6-foot-3, did it well. He went from 198¼ pounds for his final cruiserweight fight (against Tony Bellew) in 2018 to 215 pounds in his first heavyweight bout (against Chazz Witherspoon) 11 months later, meaning the Ukrainian took almost a year to add bulk. He has topped out at 227¼ (in his second fight with Daniel Dubois) in July.

Opetaia is 6-foot-2 and walks around at 210 pounds, perhaps a bit more if he's not particularly active. That's a clear indication that he has a lot of work to do when the time comes.

Has Usyk provided the perfect blueprint for Opetaia? No, he said. He finds inspiration from his predecessors but, as he said, "everyone is different." He'll do it his way.

"I think if I do it properly, if I do it smart, things will work out well," he said. "You have to do it correctly. It's a process. I don't understand guys who say, 'Oh, you just have to put on a little weight.' You have to work hard to be strong. I'm confident I can do that. People say, 'You have the ability, the hand speed,' stuff like that. No. You have to do it properly. Of course, the heavyweight division is the heavyweight division. It has the 'wow' factor, which goes back to the days of Ali and Holyfield and Lewis and Fury. I just want to do it the way we should do it, once we make that decision.

Mark Robinson

Only Opetaia has stopped British contender Jack Massey.

"Obviously I want to fight for a world heavyweight championship one day. I've been boxing my whole life. I've always had something to win, something to prepare for – national titles, world championships, the Olympics. I've always had a purpose, a goal. It's not just about fighting. That's why the thought process of the other cruiserweights doesn't make sense to me. We're just staying in the same spot. Why not level up?"

Yes, it always goes back to the cruiserweight division at this moment in Opetaia's career. That's his obsession. He's convinced that victories over his biggest rivals in the weight class would raise his profile and become an important stepping stone to bigger (literally) and better things in the near future.

Only one potential opponent would motivate him to move up in weight tomorrow: Usyk, who has twice beaten Joshua, Fury and Daniel Dubois over a four-year period to become an all-time great. Opetaia called the dream matchup "the kind of fight that comes once in a lifetime."

However, it's highly unlikely to happen given Usyk's age – he'll be 39 in January – and the fact Opetaia is still building his name.

So his focus remains squarely on his current division for the time being. And he'll continue to operate as he has all along, working hard, pursuing the most meaningful fights and taking it a step at a time. And he trusts that he will accomplish his goals.

And who knows? Maybe one day a rising young star – perhaps one from Australia – will be as excited to meet him as he was to meet Jones and Lewis.

"I don't really think like that," he said, referring to the way he's perceived. "I'm just chasing my dreams. I have since I had my first fight at 8 years old. I'm chasing to be undisputed and then take what comes after that, whether it's a super fight or someone coming up. And then I'll go up to heavyweight eventually. I'm just trying to do what I want to do. I've always had the goal in my head of becoming a world champion, to collect other belts and become undisputed.

"Chasing my dreams and staying in my lane has led me to where I am today. Like I said, I just always try to level up and get better. That's all I want to do."

And, as his manager Francis put it: "Jai wants to go down in history not only as one of the best fighters to come out of this region of the world but a global superstar. That's his ambition, to have his family name in the history books. And I believe he's on his way to doing that.

"You can't deny greatness." RING

GAME CHANGER

A PROPOSED BIPARTISAN BILL AIMS TO REFORM THE BUSINESS OF PROFESSIONAL BOXING AND CLEAN UP A TARNISHED SPORT – WOULD IT WORK?

By Mike Silver

If you think professional boxing is in great shape, you can stop reading now. But if you're among the many fans frustrated and disappointed by the chaos, corruption and confusion that have plagued the sport for years, read on.

A Flawed System

First, some background information: A major problem for professional boxing is its lack of a legitimate, centralized regulatory body. Unlike the NFL, NBA, MLB or NHL, professional boxing in the United States has never had a national commissioner with the power to limit abuse and set uniform standards. Instead, each state has its own taxpayer-funded boxing commission that is often staffed by political appointees who know little or nothing about the sport.

A state's boxing commission collects tax revenues from fight promotions, requires medical exams (although the number and type of tests vary from state to state), grants licenses and permits, approves matches and issues suspensions for infractions.

But too often they are inconsistent in their most important duty: protecting the fighters.

Although the commissions' essential role is to protect the health and well-being of the athlete, their performance is often hindered by bureaucratic inefficiency and incompetence. One of their biggest failures is compromising their authority to the sport's so-called "sanctioning organizations" – the IBF, WBA, WBC and WBO (known in the industry as the "Alphabet Groups").

Despite having no legal authority, these self-appointed quasi-official entities are treated by the state commissions like de facto regulators. As a result, the commissions regularly green-light dangerous mismatches approved by the sanctioning organization.

It is common knowledge that the Alphabets' monthly ratings of contenders – which determine who gets a title shot – cannot be trusted because instead of being based on merit, they are often manipulated at the behest of powerful promoters.

Many states even allow a sanctioning organization to dictate who will referee and judge a title fight (usually at the direction of the promoter). If a commissioner objects or questions a possible mismatch, the promoter threatens to move the show to another, more compliant state. The commission usually caves. It is this abrogation of the state's authority that makes a dangerous sport even more hazardous, and that has resulted in injuries and deaths that could have been prevented.

Despite what their websites proclaim, the sanctioning bodies are not concerned with fighter safety. The sole reason for their existence is to collect huge "sanctioning fees" taken from both champion and challenger for the right to fight for an organization's title belt.

For over 60 years, from the early 1900s to the 1960s, there were never more than eight to 10 weight divisions, with generally one undisputed champion for each. Sanctioning fees were unheard of until the Alphabets decided to turn the sport into their own personal ATM machine.

The Alphabets were voracious. To generate more fees, they have invented dozens of titles and added seven new (and unnecessary) weight divisions – eight if you count the new "Bridgerweight" division recognized by the WBA and WBC. Right now, there are over 100 world champions (nobody is sure of the exact number). That number doesn't include "eliminator" fights that also require fees from both contestants. Even pro wrestling wouldn't have the nerve to create so many specious "champions."

Right now, there are over 100 world champions (nobody is sure of the exact number).

Yet despite raking in millions of dollars in sanctioning fees, the IBF, WBA, WBC and WBO have contributed nothing of value back to the sport. What they *have* contributed is an unprecedented level of confusion that includes hundreds of champions nobody's heard of. Many fans no longer consider the sport worthy of their time or attention.

Fixing a Broken Sport

So, the question to be asked is: Will the recently proposed bipartisan bill introduced in Congress change anything? "The Muhammad Ali American Boxing Revival Act" (H.R. 4624) was presented on July 23 by U.S. representatives Brian Jack (R-GA.) and Sharice Davids (D-KS). Davids is a former MMA fighter who was elected in 2019 to represent her district in Kansas.

The bill updates the mostly toothless "Professional Boxing Safety Act" of 1996 and is intended to modernize U.S. boxing governance. According to the sponsors of the bill, it will offer boxers more opportunities, better pay and enhanced safety while addressing inconsistencies in regulations across different states.

The legislation backs the creation of a new boxing structure: the Unified Boxing Organization (UBO). It describes a league-style system modeled after the UFC. The aim is to bring a more structured approach to the fragmented professional boxing industry, similar to what the UFC has achieved in mixed martial arts. The UFC has brought order, safety and mainstream success to mixed martial arts, becoming the largest and most profitable MMA organization in the world.

The plan is for the UBO to operate under the auspices of TKO Boxing, a subsidiary of TKO Group Holdings, the same multibillion-dollar company that owns the UFC and WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment). Boxers would be under contract with a UBO association, or league, and compete according to unified rules and without reliance on a sanctioning organization. The proposed bill lays out the following reforms:

- **No sanctioning fees for rankings or title fights.**
- **New enhanced medical standards and safety protections for fighters.**
- **Government oversight that finally holds people accountable.**
- **National minimum of $25,000 in health insurance for bout injuries**
- **A minimum pay scale per round to protect entry-level fighters from exploitation.**

Predictably, the Alphabet Groups are silent. The mostly clueless state boxing

Usyk is one of three male fighters to hold every sanctioning organization title.

Richard Pelham

Ed Mulholland/TKO Worldwide LLC via Getty Images

Dana White is a strong advocate of the Ring Magazine championship.

commissions don't know what to make of the proposed legislation – if indeed they are even aware of it. Rest assured, boxing's major promoters and the sanctioning organizations – who work closely with them – will vehemently oppose any change in governance that would threaten their dual control over the sport and the cozy, corrupt system that's lined their pockets for decades.

Boxing's current business model is broken. Even with the occasional megafight, the sport's long-term health is in serious jeopardy. Time for change is long overdue. One thing is certain: If the UBO takes off and it mimics the UFC model, it will represent a seismic change for the sport.

Boxing's current business model is broken. Even with the occasional megafight, the sport's long-term health is in serious jeopardy. Time for change is long overdue.

But will its entry into the fray further balkanize professional boxing by creating yet another Alphabet organization that recognizes its own set of champions and contenders? Can we be assured that boxing will not be replacing one bad system with another? Critics of the bill say it would concentrate too much power in one entity. They caution that the UBO, like the UFC, would take over the roles of matchmaker, ranking organization, sanctioning body and rights holder. This could lead to abuses involving corrupt arrangements, manipulated rankings and bias in matchmaking. Like the UFC, the UBO could become a monopoly and the fighters taken advantage of in terms of earnings, especially if the new Ali Act favors promoters over fighters. It would be especially problematic if the UBO becomes unaccountable to outside oversight. In that scenario, the UBO would be no better than the IBF, WBA, WBC or WBO and we would be back to square one. Hopefully, this will not be the case.

A Roadmap for Safety Reform

On the plus side, safety is a priority in the UFC. It is hoped that same concern would also apply to their boxing division. I know of no combat sports organization, other than the UFC, that suspends referees who tend to stop fights too late. No state boxing commission has ever done that.

If the UBO is serious about boxing safety it should study the reforms outlined in my new book, *When in Doubt, Stop the Bout: A Revolutionary Approach to Boxing Safety and Reform*. The book provides a useful roadmap for making the sport safer while still preserving its inherent drama and excitement.

Ending Sanctioning Fees

The part of the bill that prohibits all "sanctioning fees" charged to fighters is very significant. It could be the catalyst that will finally bring an end to the Alphabet gangs. Sanctioning fees are the only reason they exist. If fighters realize they can do better financially as employees of the UBO – and never have to pay fees – they will flock to the new organization.

Dana White, the CEO of the UFC, is directly involved in the new boxing venture and has said the project is progressing well with Paramount+ on board as a broadcaster. If he brings to boxing the same organization, marketing savvy and focus on safety that made the UFC a global powerhouse, then maybe – just maybe – this version of boxing can succeed and be good for the sport.

Will the UBO be a panacea for boxing? We will have to wait and see. The devil, as they say, is in the details. Much depends on how the bill is implemented and enforced and how it evolves over time. It is understandable if many fans remain pessimistic. The history of boxing is replete with abuse, exploitation, promoter control, conflicts of interest and corrupt practices. The sad truth is that it's the boxers who usually wind up getting the short end of the stick. The new bill, if poorly implemented, could risk repeating many of those dangers under a different structural guise. One should always be cognizant of the fact that, in professional boxing, things could always get worse – and often do.

Needed: A Boxing Commissioner Worthy of the Task

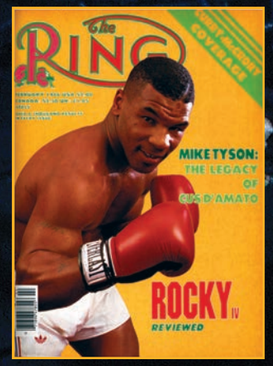
One final thought: If this new system is going to succeed, it needs to appoint a commissioner with impeccable credentials. The UBO needs a national commissioner with the integrity and authority of a David Stern or Pete Rozelle, two of the most impactful and successful commissioners in their respective sports. It would go a long way in restoring the public's confidence in professional boxing. RING

Award-winning boxing historian and author Mike Silver's newest book is When in Doubt, Stop the Bout: A Revolutionary Approach to Boxing Safety and Reform.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

MIKE TYSON: THE LEGACY OF CUS D'AMATO

By Nigel Collins



THE FOLLOWING INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED IN LATE 1985 AND APPEARED IN THE FEBRUARY 1986 ISSUE OF THE RING, WHICH FEATURED MIKE TYSON AS COVER STAR FOR THE FIRST TIME.

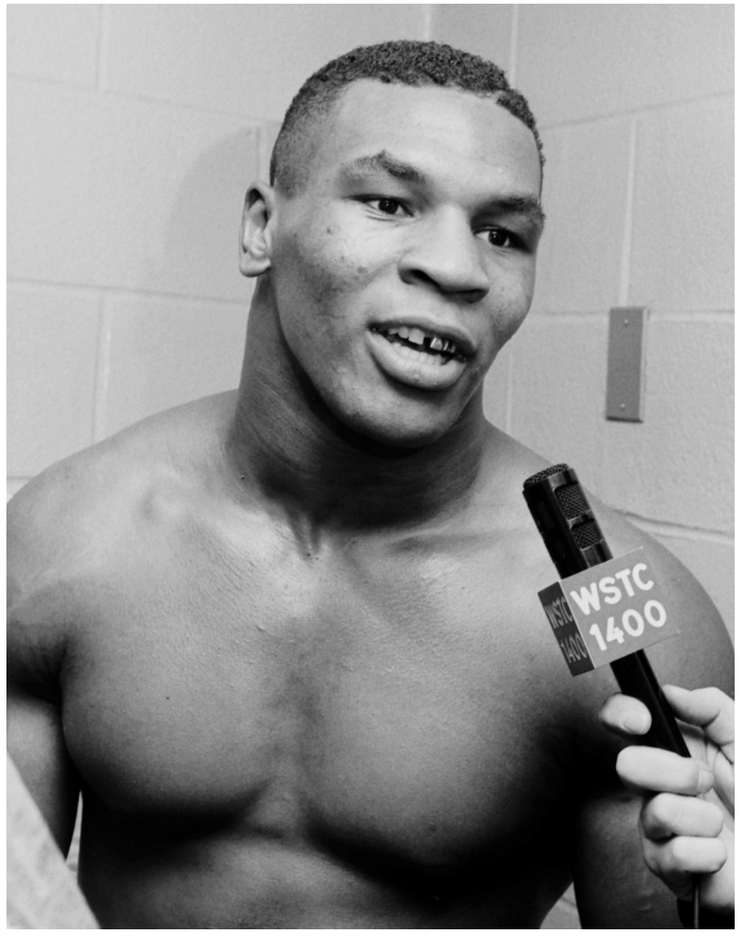
SHAKEN BY THE DEATH OF HIS MENTOR, TYSON CONTINUES HIS QUEST FOR THE HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP.

MIKE TYSON WAS SITTING IN A DARK room watching a videotape of Jack Johnson when a visitor arrived and suggested they watch a tape of Mike's 10-month career next. It didn't take long. Since his professional debut on March 6, 1985, Tyson has captured the imagination of the boxing world by streaking to 13 consecutive knockouts – and still counting. Nine of his victims have exited in the opening round. And while the debate continues as to whether he is a legend in the making, or just another built-up palooka who'll fall apart the first time he faces a top-notch fighter, nobody is accusing Mike Tyson of being dull.

Tyson watched the tape impassively and, for the most part, refrained from comment. One victory (over Donnie Long) was judged particularly pleasing because "everybody said he would give me trouble," and another because "I heard he was a cop." But as most of the knockouts flickered by, Mike was mute. In the time-honored tradition of strong, silent men from Samson to Sylvester Stallone, he let his fists do the talking.

There is somewhat of a comic book quality about Tyson's fights. When he hits opponents, they just don't fall or slump to the mat. They fly across the ring, often bouncing off the ropes before crashing to the canvas. It's a little like watching Popeye belt Brutus, or Batman plaster The Penguin. The violence is so exaggerated, it seems particularly surreal.

The spectacular manner in which Tyson disposes of his ring adversaries is not the only thing that makes him something out



At 19 years old, Tyson was already a seasoned interviewee.

of the ordinary. Mike looks more like an NFL fullback than a fighter. He is 220 pounds of muscle crammed into a 5-foot-11 frame. His 19½ inch neck is larger than any heavyweight champion's this side of Primo Carnera. He is, in a way, boxing's equivalent of William "The Refrigerator" Perry – sans fat. And he's only 19 years old.

But numbers, whether they are related to knockouts or biceps, are not the stuff that legends are made of. No, what makes Tyson something special is his lasting relationship with the late Cus D'Amato. It is the story of how D'Amato took a troubled young man under his wing, delivered him from the mean streets of New York City's Brownsville section, and gave him an opportunity to fulfill his destiny. A destiny that D'Amato was positive would lead to the heavyweight championship of the world.

However, the road to sport's greatest prize is not paved by wise old men, anxious to pass on their knowledge. D'Amato could only show the protégé of his waning years the path to glory. Mike had to do the fighting. And fight he has, averaging a match every couple of weeks since his pro debut.

Tyson's whirlwind march through the John Does of the heavyweight division was hardly interrupted by the recent death of D'Amato. Although Mike was one of Cus' pallbearers, he was back in the ring a week after the funeral.

"I don't know who made up the saying, but 'the show must go on,'" said Mike softly. "That's what Cus believed."

Nevertheless, D'Amato's death was a staggering blow, one that still brings a quiver to Mike's voice when he speaks of his beloved mentor.

"Cus was more than a father to me. Anyone can be a father and it doesn't really mean anything. Cus was my backbone. I'm not over it (D'Amato's death) at all. The things we practiced (in the gym) for years and years … now I'm starting to do them and he's not around to see it.

"As a person, I'm just not happy. I'm not in a state where I hate the world and want to commit suicide. Far from it. It's just that although I'm somewhat successful, the people I enjoy the most, like Cus and my mother, aren't here. I know life goes on, but it's tough when you lose two important people."

The heavyweight dreadnought seemed paradoxically vulnerable in his grief, but Tyson didn't always have such faith in D'Amato. It took time. When the State of New York first released Mike into Cus' custody, he couldn't quite figure out where the old man was coming from.

"I didn't know what was going on. I didn't trust him," recalled Tyson when asked about his early days in D'Amato's Catskill Mountains retreat. "The real objective for me was to get out of that place I was in (Tryon School in Johnstown, New York, a penal institution for incorrigible boys). I wanted to get the hell out of there."

Tyson downplays his wild years on the streets, saying: "I wasn't really a bad kid. I used to rob and steal. Other people may consider that bad, but in my atmosphere and neighborhood, it wasn't shit. Other guys did worse things. They murdered people."

At first, D'Amato's home was just another prison to Tyson, but slowly the child of the ghetto was won over by Cus' kindness and understanding. According to Mike, it took the better part of two years, but eventually, he grew to trust and love the man who had, in a different era, taken Floyd Patterson and Jose Torres to world championships.

"He did everything for my best interest," said Tyson. "It sounds funny, but when I was late for dinner, he'd always make sure nobody touched my food. And he wouldn't let anybody go in my room. We used to talk all the time. I was young, 14 or 15 years old. The things he was saying didn't always mean that much to me. Then an hour after we would finish talking, he would ask me, 'Mike, do you remember anything that I told you?' And I would say, 'Yeah, yeah,' and go outside. He told me so many things I would forget them. But then, I'd be walking down the street later and I would remember.

"Cus used to tell me mostly about how to be a successful person. I used to tell him how I would like to meet famous people, like actors, and he would tell me to keep doing what I was doing and one day they'd be breaking their necks trying to meet me. And he was right."

One of the things D'Amato strongly believed was that boxing was a form of entertainment, and that in order to be successful, a professional fighter has to also be entertaining. About six months before his death, Cus told The Ring, "From the beginning, Mike has been taught to be exciting." In an effort to show exactly how well Mike learned this particular lesson, we recently traveled to Albany, New York – the site of his 13th consecutive victory.

IT WAS A COLD RAINY NIGHT, but almost 3,000 fans braved the elements, filling the Colonie Coliseum to capacity. Many among them proudly wore their Mike Tyson t-shirts. Basketball may have its "Dr. J" and baseball its "Dr. K," but a couple of kids at the Coliseum had a handmade sign proclaiming Tyson "Dr. Knockout." The posters already billed him as the "Future Heavyweight Champion."

The customers tolerated two inept prelims, and then it was time for Tyson to do his thing. Whenever possible, Mike's bouts start around 9 p.m. so that the tape of his latest triumph is ready in time for the nightly newscasts across the nation.

The designated victim was Canadian Conroy Nelson, a tall lanky boxer who entered the ring amidst a scattering of boos. When Mike came down the runway, the arena erupted into a wall of noise that seldom subsided until the hero was on his way to the shower.

It was a typical Tyson fight. Mike exploded from his corner and immediately took the fight to Nelson, who meekly covered up and retreated. Seeing that Nelson was protecting his head at all costs, Tyson wisely concentrated his attack on the body. As wicked hooks from both hands sunk into Nelson's sides, he grimaced and tried his best to survive.

Midway into the round, Tyson paused momentarily, and Nelson landed his only decent punch of the evening – a sharp right uppercut to the chin. The punch brought no adverse effects and Mike quickly resumed his assault. On two occasions, left hooks to Nelson's body almost ended the fight, but Conroy was still on his feet when the bell signaled the end of his three minutes in Tyson's meat grinder.

Thirty seconds into the second, it was all over. It took just one brutal left hook to the head to take the rest of the fight out of the shell-shocked Canadian. The punch caught Nelson on the side of his nose, sending him tumbling to the floor. He rolled towards the ropes where he lay, one foot and arm draped over the bottom rope. When referee Sidney Rubenstein's count reached seven, Nelson made an attempt to struggle to his feet. He appeared to just beat the count, but Rubenstein counted him out anyway. There was no argument from any quarter.

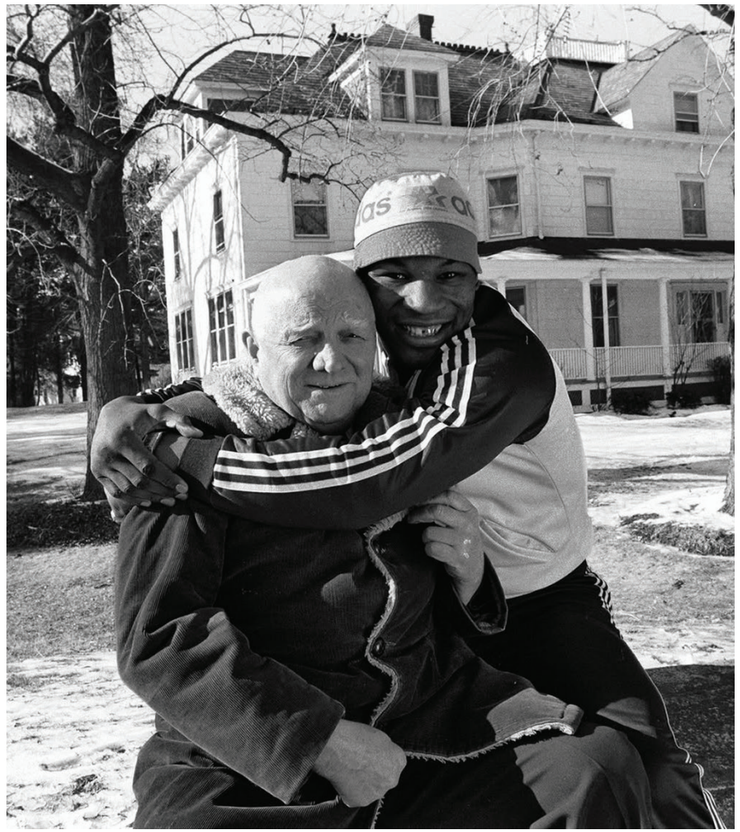
Shortly after his easy win, Tyson was seated on a couch in the trailer that served as his dressing room. Surrounded by the flower of the provincial press, he politely answered the same old questions he's already answered a hundred times before, but it was co-manager Jim Jacobs who really shined during the question-and-answer session. Jacobs parried probing questions into the quality of Mike's opponents with the skill of a career diplomat. When asked about Tyson's next scheduled opponent (the hapless Sammy Scaff), Jacobs made sure to emphasize his size (around 250 pounds), but astutely avoided mentioning just how many of those pounds were pure blubber. It was a virtuoso performance by all concerned – and another step along the trail that Cus D'Amato had so carefully laid out for both manager and fighter.

It is the relationship between D'Amato and Jacobs that ties the Mike Tyson story together in such a neat package. Jacobs, a precise man who chooses his words carefully, is highly respected in boxing circles for both his knowledge of the sport and his association with outstanding fighters. Jacobs and his partner, Bill Cayton, have already handled two world champions in Wilfred Benitez and Edwin Rosario. The fact that they are also partners in the fight film business is another bonus. When it comes to researching opponents or marketing a fighter, they have few peers. But it was Jim's almost lifelong friendship with D'Amato that brought them together with Tyson.

"There is no one in the world whose judgment I trust more than Cus D'Amato's," said Jacobs. "If a thousand people, and I mean this literally, told me a fighter was 'A,' and Cus told me he was 'B,' he was 'B.' And Cus D'Amato told me in his opinion Mike Tyson was going to be the heavyweight champion of the world. That's all I had to hear."

What has ensued goes far beyond the normal fighter/manager relationship.

"There is an incredible difference between our relationship with Mike



Tyson was never more centered than he was around Cus D'Amato.

and other fighters we've managed," said Jacobs. "When Bill and I got involved with Wilfred Benitez and Edwin Rosario, it was exciting, but it was business. It is completely different with Mike. Our relationship with Mike is, first and foremost, a family relationship. It just so happens that he is a professional boxer. Cus adored Mike and that love and affection is contagious."

Despite Tyson's remarkable transformation from street punk to a young man on the threshold of possible athletic greatness, he remains partially hidden behind a screen of suspicion.

"I don't trust anyone," claims Mike. "People want to do me favors. They want to take me out to dinner. But they didn't want to buy me dinner five years ago when I didn't have any food.

"Every day of my life I look in the mirror and I know I'm not Mr. Black America. I don't have the most charming personality in the world. But girls continue to call and want to go out with me. And eventually, they're going to look for something in return."

This bitter residue from the past will probably benefit Tyson as he swims boxing's shark-infested waters. It certainly doesn't sound like any camp followers will be draining Tyson's coffers. And those gnawing memories of his deprived childhood just might provide the catalyst to make D'Amato's formula bear fruit.

As Tyson's knockouts continue to mount, so does the number of people who tend to agree with Jacobs' glowing assessment.

"Right now I think he's the best young heavyweight I've seen in years," said veteran matchmaker Teddy Brenner. "He's a great offensive fighter, highly competitive. He doesn't know about 'feeling out' an opponent in the first round. He goes for the kayo right away. He's a good puncher and a good finisher.

"I only have two questions that remain to be answered," continued Brenner. "One, how will he do when someone takes him five or six rounds? Is he musclebound? If you remember, George Foreman was great in the early rounds, but then he used to run out of gas. Two, how well can Tyson take a punch?"

Brenner also helped put into perspective the sometimes questionable quality of Mike's opponents.

"Some of the guys he's beaten have been bums, but guys like Donnie Long and Conroy Nelson usually give you rounds. Tyson took them out early. I have problems getting him opponents for Atlantic City because guys know that if they get knocked out, they'll be suspended and have to take a lot of expensive medical tests before they can fight in New Jersey again."

Others are not so charitable in their evaluation.

"In the way he's been handled, it's almost like he's a 'white hope' in a black man's skin," opined The Ring's own Jack Obermayer, who has had several opportunities to observe Tyson in action in Atlantic City. "Tyson has an honorable man behind him in Jim Jacobs, but I think everyone is making far too much of him, far too soon."

Jacobs would be the first to agree that it is premature to start talking about a title fight.

"Take a look at any fighter who comes to your mind, Joe Louis, Ray Robinson, anybody, and look at what they did in the first 10 months of their careers," challenged Jacobs. "They weren't even in the embryo stage of their careers. They weren't even getting started in the first 10 months. That's why Bill and I get hysterical when people ask us when Mike is fighting for the world title."

Jacobs also has an answer for those who criticize the caliber of opposition Tyson sees when he looks across the ring on fight night.

"I take that as a supreme compliment. The more we are criticized, the more I read in the papers that we are moving Mike too slowly, the more I'm pleased. I look on it as a badge of honor. The people who try to suggest the pace a young, 19-year-old fighter with enormous talent should be moved at are probably brilliant sports writers, probably excellent television commentators, but whether or not they are qualified to be boxing managers is a different question."

"I find it amusing," adds Cayton, whose production The Legendary Champion was nominated for an Academy Award.

Part of D'Amato's method of building a fighter is predicated on never, never allowing one of his fighters to face a man Cus wasn't absolutely sure he could beat. Needless to say, D'Amato was less than enthralled when Patterson finally decided to defend his title against Sonny Liston. And you better believe that Jacobs and Cayton are following the D'Amato method with Tyson.

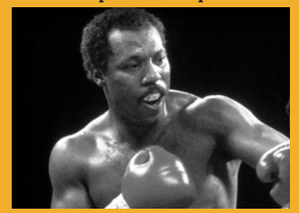
"I talked to Cus for thousands of hours about Mike," revealed Jacobs. "Cus would repeat himself. He would tell me, in great detail, over and over, every step to take with Mike. When I think about what I'm doing, I just press a button in my head and I can hear Cus talking to me. What I am doing is precisely and exactly what Cus told me to do."

But in the final analysis, it doesn't really matter what Jacobs does, or what anybody says or writes about Tyson. We have come full circle in our search for the answer to the riddle the untested Tyson presents – back to the fighter himself. Eventually, Tyson will step into the ring with someone capable of administering the final exam, and then, only then, will we know whether Cus D'Amato was right.

The Ring

Top 10 heavyweights in the February 1986 issue

Champion: Michael Spinks



1. Pinklon Thomas

2. Larry Holmes

3. Tim Witherspoon

4. Tony Tubbs

5. Greg Page

6. Gerrie Coetzee

7. Trevor Berbick

8. Carl Williams

9. Mike Weaver

10. Michael Dokes

NEVER SO SWEET

SUGAR RAY ROBINSON'S THIRD FIGHT AGAINST BOBO OLSON IS AN ENDURING TESTAMENT TO THE GREATNESS OF BOXING'S MOST HALLOWED HERO

by Don Stradley

History may record it as a simple "KO 2" for Sugar Ray Robinson, but the circumstances surrounding the night of December 9, 1955, when Robinson challenged Carl "Bobo" Olson for the middleweight championship, were anything but simple. The fight was not just about a boxing title; it was about pride, redemption and a legend's last chance to prove he still belonged.

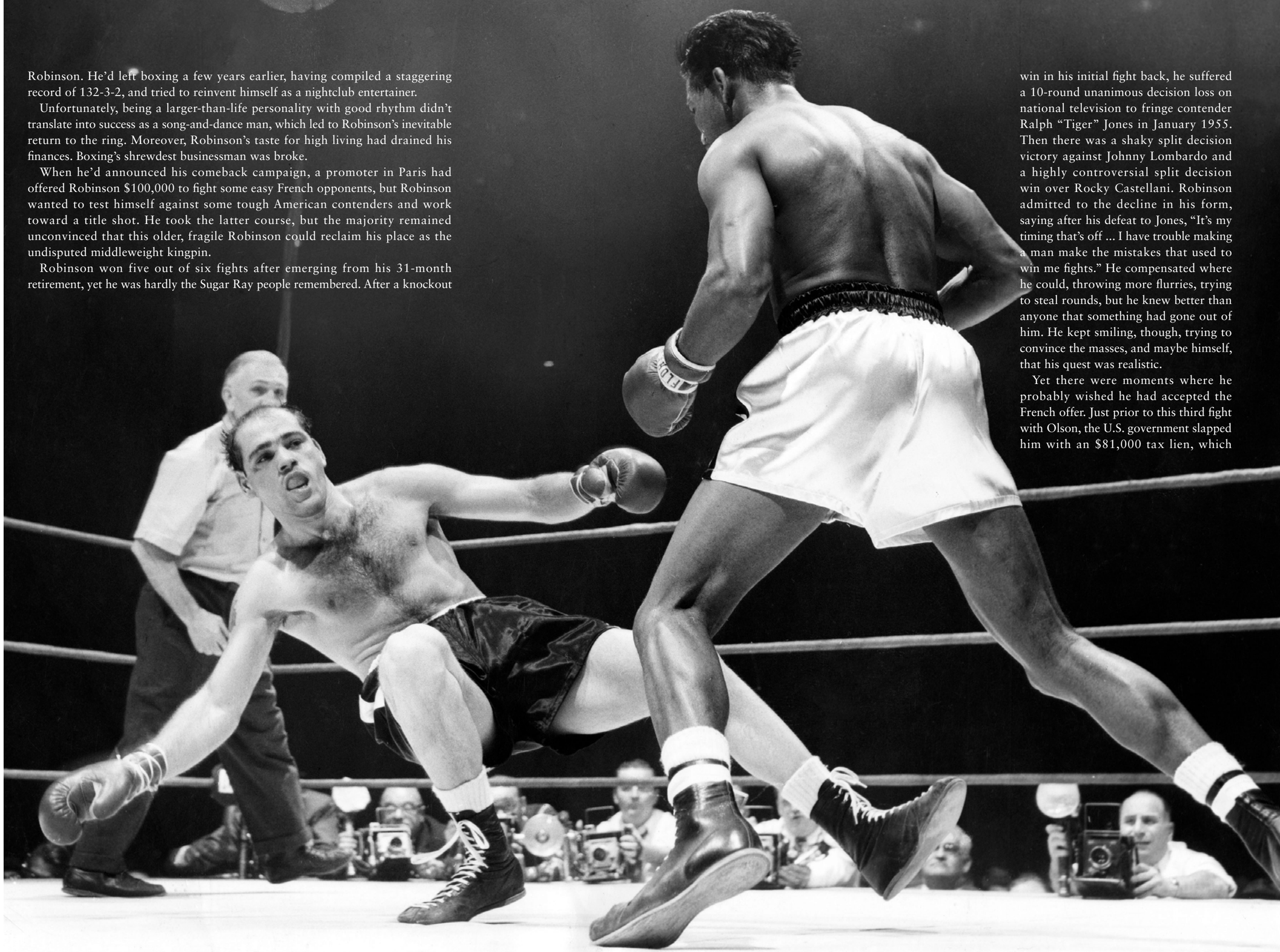
Granted, he entered Chicago Stadium to fight a man he'd beaten twice before, but this was a slightly worn version of Robinson. He'd left boxing a few years earlier, having compiled a staggering record of 132-3-2, and tried to reinvent himself as a nightclub entertainer.

Unfortunately, being a larger-than-life personality with good rhythm didn't translate into success as a song-and-dance man, which led to Robinson's inevitable return to the ring. Moreover, Robinson's taste for high living had drained his finances. Boxing's shrewdest businessman was broke.

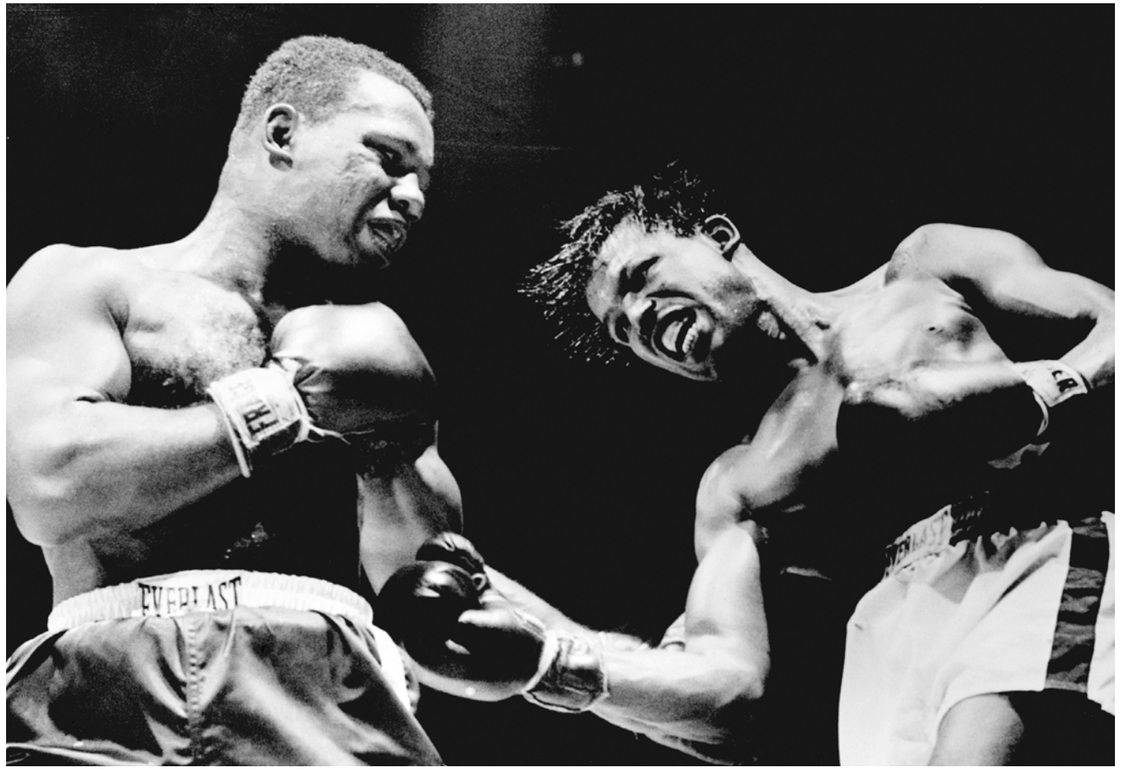
When he'd announced his comeback campaign, a promoter in Paris had offered Robinson $100,000 to fight some easy French opponents, but Robinson wanted to test himself against some tough American contenders and work toward a title shot. He took the latter course, but the majority remained unconvinced that this older, fragile Robinson could reclaim his place as the undisputed middleweight kingpin.

Robinson won five out of six fights after emerging from his 31-month retirement, yet he was hardly the Sugar Ray people remembered. After a knockout win in his initial fight back, he suffered a 10-round unanimous decision loss on national television to fringe contender Ralph "Tiger" Jones in January 1955. Then there was a shaky split decision victory against Johnny Lombardo and a highly controversial split decision win over Rocky Castellani. Robinson admitted to the decline in his form, saying after his defeat to Jones, "It's my timing that's off ... I have trouble making a man make the mistakes that used to win me fights." He compensated where he could, throwing more flurries, trying to steal rounds, but he knew better than anyone that something had gone out of him. He kept smiling, though, trying to convince the masses, and maybe himself, that his quest was realistic.

Yet there were moments where he probably wished he had accepted the French offer. Just prior to this third fight with Olson, the U.S. government slapped him with an $81,000 tax lien, which



One spectacular flurry sent Bobo Olson sprawling to the canvas.



Robinson lost big to Tiger Jones, who was on a five-fight losing streak.

meant the 35-year-old former champion would be fighting for literally nothing – along with a modest purse, he'd negotiated for 25% of the gross gate, which would be wiped out by the tax suit. Knowing he would keep no money from the bout, Robinson may have been motivated by higher stakes, since a win meant he'd be champion again and in a greater bargaining position for future paydays.

Another unwelcome distraction came when Alexander "Lou" Greenberg, an old business associate of Robinson, was murdered in Chicago the night before the fight. Greenberg's resume included a stint as financial adviser for Al Capone's gang, while later he served as a government witness during an extortion case that put several of Capone's men in prison. Years passed, and Capone's thugs were now free, making their own comeback. Two gunmen shot Greenberg outside a South Side restaurant, about a 20-minute drive from the stadium. Hours before the hit, Greenberg had purchased 12 tickets for the fight.

Greenberg's connection to Robinson was murky. He had owned the Canadian Ace Brewing Company (originally the Manhattan Brewing Company, managed by Greenberg for Capone), and formed an organization called World Champions Inc. in 1949. Among his collaborators in this venture was Truman Gibson of the highly corrupt International Boxing Club. Hoping to invade the New York beer market, Greenberg gave shares of the company to Robinson and Joe Louis, who were to act as celebrity fronts. However, the New York State Liquor Authority noted Greenberg's shady past and denied his application to sell beer in the state. The board declared that Robinson and Louis had "unwittingly allowed their names to be used by persons of evil design." Robinson's wife, Edna Mae, said she was "sad" about Greenberg's murder, but despite the media's attempt to connect him to the dead mob figure, Robinson offered no comments.

Besides, Robinson had a fight to think about, a contest that many dismissed as a foregone conclusion. Ticket sales were slow – on fight night there was a disappointing 12,447 in attendance. It was Chicago Stadium's largest boxing crowd of the year, but still far short of what had been forecast. Just four years earlier, there'd been 61,370 at the New York Polo Grounds to see Robinson regain the title from Randy Turpin. Robinson was seen as a fallen idol making one last run at the championship in the same city and venue where Tiger Jones had embarrassed him. The fight had even been postponed a month because

Robinson hurt his ankle, which made him seem that much feebler.

Then there was Olson.

After Robinson's retirement in December of 1952, Olson won a tournament to become the new champion and proved to be a competent titleholder. He'd been The Ring's Fighter of the Year for 1953 and feathered his cap further by beating two fighters that Robinson couldn't: Tiger Jones and Joey Maxim. Because of Robinson's recent performances and Olson's seven-year age advantage, only a handful of reporters gave Robinson a chance. Against a man he'd defeated twice before, Robinson was now a 3-to-1 underdog.

And then, with many things preying on his mind in a poorly attended fight that few expected him to win, Robinson demolished Olson at 2:51 of the second round.

Perhaps it was having a familiar opponent in front of him that did it, but Robinson seemed as sharp as he'd been before his retirement. Bobo forced the fighting by coming forward, but Robinson responded with short hooks, bolo punches, long right leads and by dancing out of range, his feet as nimble as ever. The unexpected climax was vintage Robinson: a blinding left hook, then several more with a flush right mixed in, and suddenly Olson was falling backward. The downed champion remained still for a moment, like a statue knocked from its pedestal.

As referee Frank Sikora counted down the final seconds of his title reign, Olson rolled over and attempted to rise. Later, Olson remembered no details, only asking his handlers, "Did I try to get up?"

There would be talk from Olson's camp that he'd been preoccupied with marital troubles and that he'd lost too much weight and came into the ring feeling weak. At the time, though, the bewildered Olson could only mumble about Robinson's quickness. "So fast, so fast," he said in his dressing room. "It was his fast combinations, and I got careless. It was too fast. I just don't know what happened."

Sugar Ray and his wife gleefully check the morning papers.

Bettmann

In the haze of the flashing camera bulbs, Robinson was a mess. Sobs wracked his body for five solid minutes. He had just beaten Olson, but the real enemy was a ghost – the phantom of his loss to Jones that had shadowed him for months. "I call it a ghost," he said after composing himself, "because the thought of trying a comeback after that beating haunted me." The victory was a long-overdue funeral for that memory. The final scene was almost too perfect, a piece of Hollywood scripting: a champion reclaiming his throne in the very same stadium where he had once been left for dead. The other player in that drama, Jones, was a fading photograph; since beating Robinson, he'd lost three times and disappeared from the title conversation.

Robinson eventually pulled himself together and commented on the stunning nature of the knockout: "I'm not sure what punch did the damage. I hit him once and he was wobbly, and I kept hitting him – and down he went."

In recovering his old title, Robinson became the first boxer to win the middleweight crown a third time. The press, who had been so critical, wasted no time celebrating his victory. The United Press called him the "miracle man," the Detroit Tribune hailed him as "a legend in sports annals," and The Herald Statesman dubbed him "the 35-year-old living legend." The entire boxing world, it seemed, was happy to have been proven wrong.

But one thing hadn't changed for Robinson. He was still in debt to the government.

Because of the disappointing attendance, his take for the bout was approximately $46,000, which was nowhere near covering what he owed in back taxes. But as Robinson wrote in his autobiography, the deep debts were far from his mind that night. "My tax troubles had begun," he wrote, "but I didn't care. I was the champ again."

Robinson would lose and regain the title twice more, but it's likely that none of his championship wins were as sweet as the night he stunned his critics, the night he wept what he called "tears of revenge."

It was a night he wouldn't forget, and a night Bobo couldn't remember.

THE POSTER ROOM

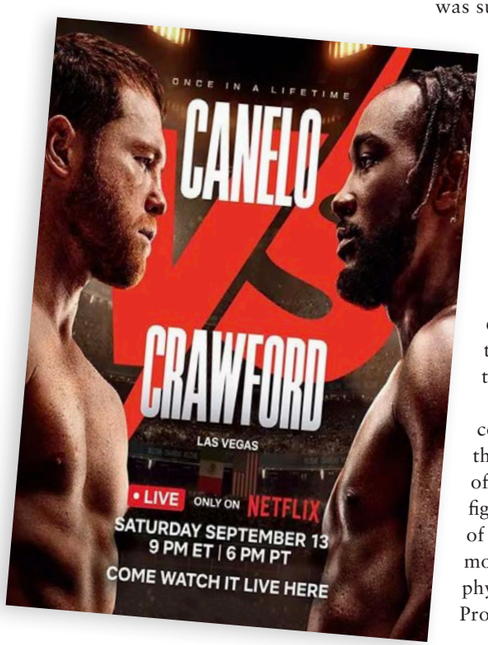
By Dan Rafael

When I returned from Las Vegas after covering the Canelo Alvarez-Terence Crawford fight, I did what has been a ritual for decades. I sat down at my office computer and opened the database I created to keep track of the boxing posters in my vast collection, which has been described by friends as both incredible and insane.

I dutifully updated the list to reflect the addition of the four posters I purchased at Canelo-Crawford, bringing the total to 5,186. Of course, that figure doesn't include a few hundred posters that aren't catalogued for various reasons, not to mention what may have been erased from the list in the great computer crash of 2011.

This is the life of a boxing poster collector. It is not just a hobby for me. It has become almost a way of life. Ask my wife, who doesn't love that the dining room table doubles as a place to flatten rolled posters.

When the topic for this column was suggested by Editor-in-Chief Dougie Fischer, I dropped some trivia on him: The first boxing posters I bought were from an advertisement in The Ring circa 1987. I was still in high school.



Nearly 40 years and more than 5,000 posters later, I'm still at it and still love it. Big posters, small posters, rare posters, common posters, expensive ones, freebies. If there's a poster, I'll take it, thank you.

Though the vast majority of my collection is from the 1980s to the present, posters have been part of advertising and commemorating fights virtually since the creation of boxing. Despite current society's move toward all things digital, physical posters are still a thing. Promoters rely on digital art for websites and social media to get the word out about events and to entice ticket buyers, but they often still make traditional posters for bars, storefronts and community bulletin boards. Many of the biggest events also have posters produced for sale at the arena on fight night or in the host hotel or casino gift shop.

That was the case for Canelo-Crawford. The $20 site poster was available at the host hotel as well as merchandise stands at Allegiant Stadium, where they even came in a tube to keep them from getting damaged. As a veteran, here's a trick of the trade: I travel with my own tube just in case.

I have traveled regularly to cover fights for more than 25 years, so many of the posters in my collection were obtained at fights. But I've also bought from dealers, eBay and other collectors. Having been into it for so long, there are fellow collectors I trade with, which is why I always get extras at fights.

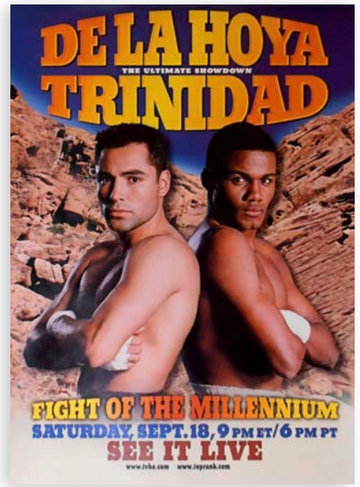
Many of my posters also came for free because sponsors give them away during fight week. It also didn't hurt to have promoter, network and casino associates happy to set a few aside. One of the best posters in my collection (perhaps one of a kind, since casinos typically discard promotional material after events) came this way. It is a plastic-like duratran (a semi-transparent image made to be illuminated from behind) that hung in a Mandalay Bay lobby light box during fight week from the greatest fight I've ever covered or seen: Jose Luis Castillo-Diego Corrales I.

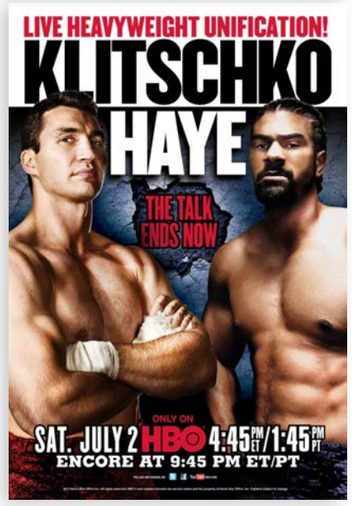
But I've also paid handsomely for the right poster in the right condition. My biggest-ticket item is an exceptionally rare poster from the legendary first Arturo Gatti-Micky Ward fight. The Mohegan Sun casino made just a few to display around the property. About 10 years ago, I became aware of one that was signed by Gatti, my all-time favorite fighter (along with Acelino "Popo" Freitas), and Ward. As a gift to myself to celebrate having just signed an ESPN contract extension, I bought it for low four figures. Don't tell my mom.

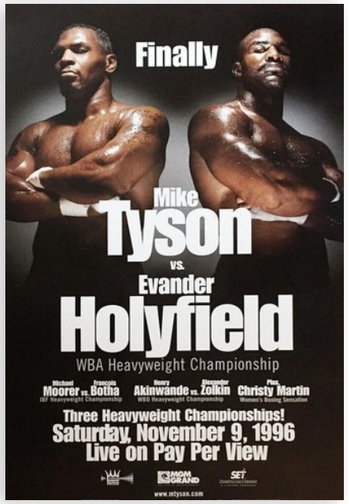
Storing 5,000-plus posters is daunting but not as hard as it may sound. I have a ton of HBO and Showtime posters that are a standard 29x40. But if you stack a few hundred on top of each other, they still only take up that much space. They just rise a few inches.

I was fortunate that when I bought my current home, it was large enough that I was able to make an executive decision to take over a room called "the library." It is now the poster room.

At about the same time I was moving, I lucked into the ability to purchase several flat file drawers from a newspaper that was moving to a new location and getting rid of its office contents. I bought them for cheap and hired some guys to deliver them to the newly appointed poster room. They are the perfect size. The drawer interiors are large enough to comfortably hold the 29x40 posters in stacks and, of course, thousands that are smaller. The drawers provide me with storage for at least 10,000 posters if, goodness, it ever comes to that.







The question I often get once somebody grasps the magnitude of my collection is: How do you know where to find a specific poster? Truth be told, there are some posters listed in the database that I 100% have but simply cannot find.

The database tells me I have eight 11x14 posters from when I went to Glendale, Arizona, to cover Kostya Tszyu stopping Sharmba Mitchell to retain his Ring/IBF junior welterweight championship in their 2004 rematch. They're in the poster room. Where? No idea. I've searched. Someday they'll be unearthed!

Generally, the big names have their own drawer. Manny Pacquiao and Floyd Mayweather Jr. have their own drawers because I have around 100 different posters (with many duplicates) representing each man's fights.

The biggest fights often had several posters: multiple site versions that were for sale, the PPV or network promotional poster and various sponsor posters. They add up.

Canelo has his own drawer. So does Oscar De La Hoya. Brothers Wladimir and Vitali Klitschko share a drawer, as do Mike Tyson, Lennox Lewis and Evander Holyfield. My posters from the fights of Gatti and Freitas are drawer mates. There's a "Mexican legends" drawer for the fighters I covered extensively: Erik Morales, Marco Antonio Barrera and Juan Manuel Marquez. There are drawers for PBC, HBO and Showtime events. You get the idea.

Incidentally, a poster generally goes in the drawer of the guy who won the fight. For example, the eight different posters I have related to Mayweather-Canelo (29 overall, due to duplicates) are stored in the Floyd drawer.

This isn't for the faint of heart. And don't even get me started on my program collection.

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING ... OR **NOT ENOUGH?**

By Dr. Margaret Goodman

Anthony Joshua employs the "live low, train high using artificial means" style of altitude training.

Does blood doping exist in boxing? It's expensive, labor-intensive and not easily available. Manipulation of blood and blood components is banned by the Voluntary Anti-Doping Association (VADA, which I run), the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) and most international and national sports organizations. Unfortunately, blood doping in any form is all too common in combat sports, regardless of anti-doping experts' attempts to curb its use.

How many fighters knowingly or unknowingly blood dope? Do fighters simply "play" the odds that they won't be caught? What are the risks? Are there legal ways to blood dope?

Your red blood cells carry oxygen from your lungs to your organs and muscles. The more red blood cells you have, the more oxygen is delivered to your muscles to increase stamina and endurance and lessen fatigue. Even a small increase in red blood cells in an elite fighter can drastically improve their training and chances to easily make it through 12 rounds.

There are several ways blood doping or blood manipulation is accomplished:

Autologous transfusion: This involves drawing your own blood weeks or even months before a bout, storing it and then re-infusing back to you. By the time you re-inject your own blood, your bone marrow has already made up for the loss, thus giving you a surplus of red blood cells. Since you are using your own blood, it is more difficult to detect.

Homologous transfusion: This method involves a transfusion from a compatible donor – matched to your blood type, then transfusing it to boost your blood count.

EPO/Erythropoietin injection: EPO is produced in your kidneys to stimulate your bone marrow to produce red blood cells. It is legally used in cancer chemotherapy and kidney failure patients. It is only given by injection.

Synthetic oxygen carriers: Synthetically produced substitutes for blood have also been developed for those acutely needing blood or when other methods aren't available.

Any form of intravascular manipulation of blood or blood components: An example would be using large amounts of IV fluid (which is also prohibited) to dilute a blood count.

Before anyone thinks blood doping is the answer to success – it can carry considerable risk.

The average male has 5 liters (around 10.5 pints) of blood; the average female has 4-4.5 liters (8.5-9.5 pints). Increasing the amount of blood in your body is like adding too much oil in an engine, resulting in sludge and engine failure. The medical risks can range from blood clots to heart attack to stroke to kidney failure to death.

How is blood doping detected?

The Athlete Biological Passport (ABP) was introduced to expose cheaters by monitoring alterations in the blood-count profile, looking for unusual fluctuations that suggest doping. WADA-accredited laboratories can also detect synthetic EPO use.

There are limitations to the ABP. It must be collected several times throughout the calendar year to prove detection. Commissions often perform no out-of-competition tests and seldom include blood, so following the ABP isn't possible unless a fighter is enrolled in an anti-doping program. The time to confirm EPO detection can vary. Some newer-generation EPO-like drugs can remain in the system for weeks instead of days. That increases detection.

Then there are the professional and ethical implications of blood doping, which include suspension, fight cancellation, loss of title and permanent damage to a fighter's reputation. It took Lance Armstrong years of cheating and a final "falling on his sword" interview with Oprah Winfrey in 2013 to admit to using EPO and transfusions during his multiple Tour de France campaigns.

VADA has had several athletes test positive for blood doping via EPO or newer similar substances that affect red blood cell production. We continue to include testing on every urine sample. Too many are still playing Russian Roulette with their reputation and health in the hopes they won't be caught.

Are there legal ways for boxers to improve their oxygen-carrying capacity?

Altitude training was researched before and after the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, which took place at approximately 7,400 feet, where endurance events had slower finishing times – all thought due to the lower oxygen levels. This resulted in numerous scientific investigations defining "altitude" as elevation above 5,000 feet. High altitude exposure is thought to increase EPO release from the kidneys and stimulates the bone marrow to produce more red blood cells.

Athlete altitude training variations appeared: 1. live high, train high; 2. live high, train low; or even 3. live low-train high using artificial means.

Option 1: *Live high-train high* becomes a constant stimulus on the athlete's body because it is always in a hypoxic state (a state of low oxygen). But it can reduce exercise intensity unless the fighter stays at the elevations for weeks.

Live high-train high is the go-to for many elite boxers like Nebraska's Terence Crawford, who trains in Colorado. Canelo Alvarez may train in northern Nevada at elevations over 5,000 feet. It's another reason Big Bear, California, is a fighter favorite at 6,700 feet.

Option 2: *Live high-train low* has always been considered the most effective method to stimulate red blood cell production, with training at lower elevations to continue maximum workouts. This must also be done for 3-4 weeks.

Option 3: *Live low-train high (artificial)* is intermittent hypoxic training using hypoxic masks or altitude chambers (tents). Many fighters use this technique where they train in an altitude simulator mimicking the elevated environment. Less stress is placed on the musculoskeletal system and it doesn't disrupt a fighter's routine.

There is a limit to how much altitude training of any kind or tents or masks will result in natural stimulation of EPO production. Nevertheless, the harmful effects are avoided and it is legal.

★ ★ ★ ★

What's new on the horizon regarding blood doping? WADA will be adding the non-medical use of carbon monoxide to its 2026 prohibited list stating that the technique can increase erythropoiesis (red blood cell increase). Everyone knows that carbon monoxide gas can be fatal when inhaled at certain doses. We have detectors in our homes; it's sadly been a go-to method for suicide attempts. However, it has been discovered that repeated use at low doses can be performance-enhancing by increasing red blood cell production. During the 2024 Tour de France, several teams were using the technique at the beginning and end of altitude training to measure the effects of training. Although there was no proof any team used the technique to cheat, the UCI (Union Cycliste Internationale) governing cycling asked WADA to ban the technique. The use of carbon monoxide for diagnostic purposes is not prohibited.

Feel free to send your "Fight Doctor" questions to comeoutwriting@gmail.com and I will respond in an upcoming issue.

Actor and ex-fighter Rich O'Brien returned to the ring with microphone in hand.

Mariana Lima

"I Can Do That"

By Thomas Hauser

A Boxing Fan Tries His Hand at Ring Announcing

Boxing fans listen to the ring announcer on fight night. And unless the man with the microphone is Michael Buffer, they're likely to think, "I can do that." But ring announcing is an art.

"Listen to me," Teddy Atlas says. "You can't be an actor just by walking onto a stage or getting up in front of a camera and talking. You have to respect the profession, take it seriously, study your craft, work at it. And the same is true of ring announcing. Most of the guys doing it today are like a box filled with trinkets that are worth a dollar a dozen. You can pull a trinket out of the box, but it will never be worth its own box. Too many of these guys are hard to listen to. Each one has his own signature phrase and thinks he'll be the next big star. They think it's easy. And it's not."

On September 19, promoter Larry Goldberg gave a boxing fan named Rich O'Brien the opportunity to be the ring announcer for the first two bouts on his fight card at Sony Hall in New York.

O'Brien is 60 years old and grew up in Queens. His father was an NYPD detective who took Rich to the Golden Gloves finals at Madison Square Garden each year. Rich was drawn to boxing and eventually entered the tournament. He won his first bout by knockout. A week later, he fought Rey Rivera (who later represented Puerto Rico at the 1988 Seoul Olympics). "That one went less well," O'Brien recalls. "I didn't go down, but they stopped it in the third round."

Including smokers, Rich had 15 amateur fights and won 10 of them. "The good fighters were operating on a different level than I was," he admits.

After graduating from college, O'Brien worked as a reporter and copy editor. In his mid-30s, he decided to change course and began training as a classical singer at the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music. Then he was accepted by the prestigious Juilliard School and segued into acting.

"I always had a reverence for great actors," he recalls. "And somewhere inside, I always wanted to act."

O'Brien is now a working actor. To help make ends meet, he has a job in marketing and sales for the Manhattan Theatre Club. A sample of his work can be seen free of charge on YouTube – a short film titled *No Peanuts for Brooks McGill*. Rich plays McGill in the film. The chief supporting actor is Teddy Atlas.

Rich welcomed the opportunity when it was suggested that he try his hand at ring announcing.

A bit of history: Early ring announcers shouted into megaphones to be heard by the crowd – or at least by those within shouting distance. Then microphones came into play.

For decades, Giovanni Addonizio (known to the public as Johnny Addie) was boxing's best-known ring announcer. Addie began announcing in the late 1930s and was hired by Madison Square Garden in 1948. He called virtually every major fight at The Garden (including the March 8, 1971, "Fight of the Century" between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier) until his untimely death in 1971 at age 69. His ring announcing credits included Sugar Ray Robinson vs. Joey Maxim at Yankee Stadium, Ali vs. Jerry Quarry in Atlanta and hundreds of small fight cards at New York City venues like St. Nicholas Arena, Sunnyside Gardens and Jamaica Arena.

The best ring announcers are consistent and technically sound with a unique persona. Buffer heads the list. His trademark (and trademarked) phrase, "LET'S GET R-R-R-READY TO RUMBL-L-L-E!" has become part of the pageantry of boxing. His presence confers legitimacy on a fight, making it seem bigger and more important than might otherwise be the case.

"The most important thing about ring announcing," Buffer says, "is that I always remember the fighters are the stars. The cheers are for them, not me. I never forget that."

David Diamante, who's regarded by many as Buffer's likely successor, is in accord and notes, "I never lose sight of the fact that it's not about me. It's about the fighters. They're the ones who go in the ring and risk their lives."

Several weeks before O'Brien's debut as a ring announcer, Diamante spoke with him on the telephone and offered advice.

"There's no school for ring announcing," David counseled. "It's on-the-job training. You'll learn as you go. But you don't just get in the ring on fight night and do it. Even now, I think out in advance what I want to say. And then I rehearse it. It's like live theater. You only have one shot. Do your homework. Implement a style that you feel comfortable with. And you'll be fine."

One day before the fights, Rich went to the weigh-in and asked the fighters he'd be introducing whether they had nicknames and how they'd like to be introduced.

On fight night, he arrived at the arena early with a list of details to nail down. How did the microphone work? What would be the cue for him to begin his introductions? How would he get the judges' scores from the commission?

Sony Hall has the ambiance of an old-time fight club. It accommodates 580 fans for boxing and the turnout was good. Rich was dressed in a dark pinstripe suit with a white shirt and conservative tie.

Matt Competello (Goldberg's regular ring announcer who would be calling the last three fights of the evening) shared his notes on the first two fights with Rich. Diamante had come to the fights to offer support and gave Rich some last-minute advice:

"Remember, you have to respect the fighters. You have to respect the fans. And you have to respect yourself."

"I'm nervous," Rich acknowledged. "But not nervous like I was before I fought."

Then it was time. At 7:45 p.m., microphone in hand, O'Brien climbed up four steps into the blue corner of the ring. He looked a bit like Broderick Crawford, the actor who won an Academy Award for his starring role in the 1949 film *All the King's Men*.

The timekeeper rang the bell five times in quick succession, signaling that Rich's moment had come. The ring was his stage. He introduced Krisi Ardito, who sang the national anthem. Then …

"This is the first fight of the evening …"

The names of the judges and referee and the fighter introductions followed.

Donte Layne knocked out Mirady Lubanzadio Zola in the second round. Rich dutifully announced the result.

The next fight was a heavyweight bout.

"Now, boxing fans, moving to the second bout of the evening. It means everything to the two men who are about to go into battle …"

George "El Montro" Arias vs. Earl "The Flash" Newman was a fast-paced encounter that gave Rich the opportunity to read the 79-73, 78-74, 78-74 scorecards in Arias' favor.

"It was a good first effort," Diamante said, appraising O'Brien's performance when the evening was done. "Rich has a good voice and good ring presence. But to do it in a serious way, he'd have to put in a lot of work. If he was a fighter, I'd say that he's a novice with potential."

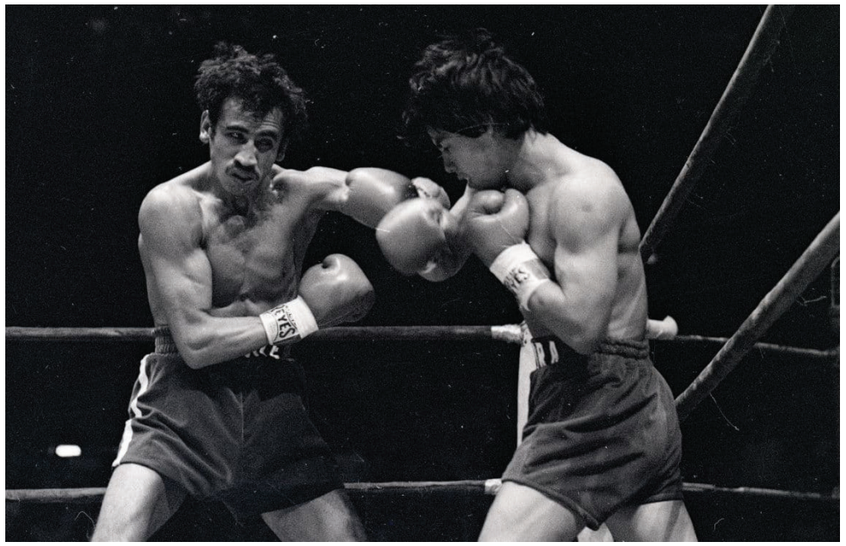
Meanwhile, O'Brien will treasure the memory of it all.

"I've been a boxing fan all my life," he said afterward. "My last fight was in 1987. I never thought I'd be in a boxing ring again. I'm happy that I had the opportunity to be part of what these boxers do and honored that I had the privilege of standing in the ring to proclaim their merit." RING

Thomas Hauser's email address is thomashauserwriter@gmail.com. His most recent book – The Most Honest Sport: Two More Years Inside Boxing – is available at Amazon.com. In 2019, Hauser was selected for boxing's highest honor – induction into the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

IMPENDING RIVALRY

By Randy Gordon



Carlos Zarate (left) and Alfonso Zamora in The Battle of the Z-Boys.

Al Pereira

The cover of this month's magazine features Naoya Inoue and Junto Nakatani. It's a matchup still in the realm of wishful thinking, but the two are on a collision course, set for May in Japan. It will be among the biggest sporting events – and certainly the biggest boxing match – ever to take place in The Land of the Rising Sun.

So, as you read this column and the rest of this month's issue, keep in mind: There are two obstacles to an Inoue-Nakatani fight happening. One is Alan Picasso. The other is Sebastian Hernandez.

Both are elite fighters, not guys masquerading as unbeaten 122-pound contenders.

Picasso is 32-0-1 (17 KOs). He is 25 years old.

Hernandez is 24 years old. He is 20-0 (18 KOs). He gets stronger as the fight goes on.

Inoue is a -4500 to -5000 favorite to win his fight against Picasso, a +1600 underdog.

Nakatani is a -1100 favorite to beat Hernandez, who is a +750 underdog.

As I think about the certain thrill and importance of an Inoue-Nakatani showdown, I smile at how many huge 118-, 122- and 126-pound title fights my career has taken me to.

Let's go back to April 23, 1977, in what was then the Fabulous Forum in Inglewood. The fight matched two unbeaten bantamweight titleholders, both from Mexico: Carlos Zarate against Alfonso Zamora.

Zarate was the WBC titleholder. He was 45-0 (44 KOs). Zamora, the Ring and WBA titleholder, was 29-0, with all his wins coming by knockout. As they were best friends, a deal was made whereby the bout would be scheduled for 10 rounds, not 15 (title bouts were 15 rounds then), and both guys would fail to make the 118-pound bantamweight limit. As many fans were disappointed this wasn't being billed as a title bout, a crowd of 13,999 turned out (around 4,000 short of capacity) for what was called the "Battle of the Z-boys." I'm glad I was one of those 13,999, as I got to watch a terrific, action-packed fight that ended in the fourth round with Zarate the winner. As far as I was concerned, Zarate – even though he was over the bantamweight limit by a pound and the fight was only scheduled for 10 rounds – was now the unified bantamweight champion.

I was also ringside inside the Roberto Clemente Coliseum in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the afternoon of October 28, 1978, for another fight involving Zarate. In this one, he took his 52-0 record into the ring to face 21-0-1 junior featherweight titleholder Wilfredo Gomez. Gomez pounded Zarate into a fifth-round TKO. I wonder how the 122-pound Gomez would have done against either Inoue or Nakatani.

On August 21, 1981, Gomez did what Zarate had tried to do against him three years earlier – he carried a few extra pounds and his 32-0-1 record (all 32 wins by stoppage) up in an attempt to win a world title in another division. His opponent was WBC featherweight titleholder Salvador Sanchez (40-1-1, 30 KOs). Gomez, not a favorite among much of the media – whom he shunned – was handed his first defeat in a one-sided, eighth-round blitz at the hands of Sanchez.

[Side note: The beatdown and loss somehow made Gomez a lot friendlier to the media when he returned to action!]

Three of the greatest 122-pound championship fights I have been ringside for were between the same two men: Rafael Marquez and Israel Vazquez.

They first fought on March 3, 2007, at the Home Depot Center in Carson, California. In that one, Marquez won the Ring and WBC junior featherweight titles, forcing Vazquez to remain in his corner after seven brutal rounds.

In a rematch five months later in Hidalgo, Texas, Vazquez regained the crown with a sixth-round TKO.

Seven months after that, the two were at it again, with Vazquez winning by a 12-round split decision in Carson. The second and third bouts were The Ring's Fight of the Year for 2007 and 2008.

I wonder if we'll get to see Inoue-Nakatani more than once.

★★★★

The nominees for the International Boxing Hall of Fame's Class of 2026 have been announced. Let's take a look:

Among the fighters, I see only one sure-shot winner: Gennadiy Golovkin. The former middleweight titleholder retired in 2022 with a record of 42-2-1 (37 KOs). The only blemishes on his record came against Canelo Alvarez, and you can make a case that Golovkin may have won two of their three fights. As I said, I believe "GGG" is a sure-shot winner. Of the remaining 41 names on the Modern ballot, I believe the 41 can be narrowed down to two of these seven names: Arthur Abraham, Nigel Benn, Vernon Forrest, Shawn Porter, Antonio Tarver, Fernando Vargas and Wilfredo Vazquez.

Golovkin was the king at 160 for years.

Amongst the Non-Participants (which include administrators, officials, cutmen, managers, trainers, ring announcers, publicists and ringside physicians), there are 29 names. Three will make it to induction weekend (June 11-14, 2026). I have whittled the list down to nine, two of whom I feel will get the call. Those two are ring officials and are among the best the sport has ever seen. They are referee/judge Jack Reiss and judge Steve Weisfeld. Reiss, who retired from refereeing last year but continues to judge, refereed more bouts (1,152) than anybody else. He has also judged 612 bouts. His total of 1,764 total bouts officiated is among the most by any official in boxing history.

Nobody has judged more bouts than Weisfeld, who is widely acknowledged as the best judge in boxing. As of mid-October 2025, he has judged an astounding 3,183 bouts.

Aside from Reiss and Weisfeld, I feel longtime Nevada ringside official Dr. Edwin "Flip" Homansky may make it in. Also late, great trainer/gym owner Jimmy Glenn, and I am hoping for late ring announcer Ed Derian. Derian (who always said the last name twice!).

In the Observer category (in which I was selected last year, along with TV executive Ross Greenburg), there are 24 names. This category includes writers, announcers, columnists, cartoonists, broadcasters, producers; record-keepers, TV executives and statisticians. Two names will be selected. As I whittled the list down, I came up with eight names: Eric Armit (journalist/record keeper), Bob Canobbio (statistician), Tom Casino (photographer), Tom Cushman (journalist), Kevin Iole (journalist), Carlos Irusta (journalist), Mark Taffet (television executive) and Alex Wallau (broadcaster).

★★★★

While no boxing promotional company has the muscle and resources of TKO/Zuffa, a tip of my Ring hat goes to all of the smaller promoters who provide the breeding grounds for the stars of tomorrow. Two of the many are Atlantic City-based Boxing Insider and Baltimore-based Pony Tail Promotions.

Larry Goldberg is the founder and president of Boxing Insider. His frequent shows originate from the Tropicana hotel and casino in Atlantic City and from venues in the heart of New York City. He is currently working on promoting a whole slate of cards in 2026. Goldberg was voted the local "Promoter of the Year" by Ring 8 last year.

James Hogan of Baltimore is the head of Ponytail Promotions. Hogan, 48, has been involved with boxing since he was a kid, as his dad had done some boxing until an injury shortened his career. Young Hogan picked up his father's love of boxing, and he began promoting local shows. In 2014, he opened Ponytail Promotions in the Baltimore area. Today, he puts on regular shows at both the Patapsco Arena and in the Horseshoe Casino, both in the Baltimore area.

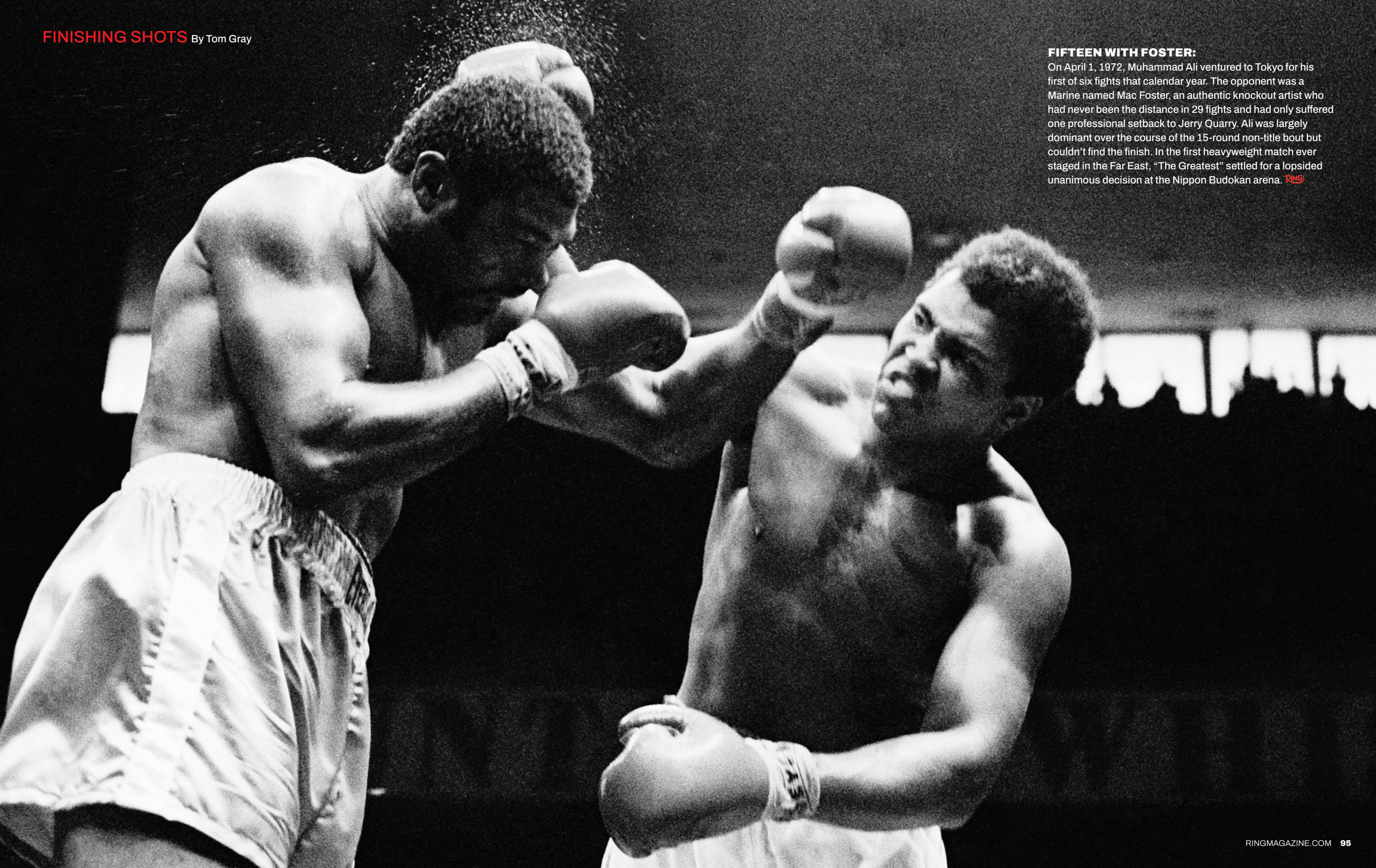
His shows have become so popular that Hogan is looking at the possibility of running one show per month in 2026.

★★★★

The New York State Athletic Commission appointed a chairman. After years being without one, New York Governor Kathy Hochul appointed one in midsummer. She did so very quietly. It was so quiet that none of my boxing colleagues knew about it. It was so quiet that I – who was once appointed commission chairman amid much fanfare – didn't know about it!

The new chairman is a U.S. veteran; a former state legislator and a former U.S. ambassador. His name is Nick Perry.

From one Commish to another: Congratulations and welcome, Commissioner Perry!



FIFTEEN WITH FOSTER:
On April 1, 1972, Muhammad Ali ventured to Tokyo for his first of six fights that calendar year. The opponent was a Marine named Mac Foster, an authentic knockout artist who had never been the distance in 29 fights and had only suffered one professional setback to Jerry Quarry. Ali was largely dominant over the course of the 15-round non-title bout but couldn't find the finish. In the first heavyweight match ever staged in the Far East, "The Greatest" settled for a lopsided unanimous decision at the Nippon Budokan arena. RING

FIGHTLINE

BY DOUG FISCHER

Fights only last a matter of minutes, but fighters are connected to each other by chains that extend for decades – even centuries – into the past. Their bond is a lineage built face-to-face: A young prospect struggles with the skills of an aging veteran whose nose was once broken by a fighter now enshrined in the International Boxing Hall of Fame. In that way, muscle memory carries knowledge and boxers face a piece of everyone their opponent has fought, everyone those people fought, and so on.

This month we're linking one of Japan's top promoters – **Hideyuki Ohashi** – to the nation's greatest boxer – **Naoya Inoue.**

Ohashi is best known as Inoue's promoter in Japan, but the 60-year-old native of Yokohama got his start in boxing as a fighter. A fan favorite at the famous Korakuen Hall in Tokyo, where the majority of his 24 pro bouts took place, he quickly developed into a world-class strawweight and junior flyweight during the 1980s.

Although formidable enough to win two 105-pound world titles, Ohashi did not possess the elite talent the star of his gym and promotional company is gifted with. However, he did rumble with two bona fide greats – Jung Koo Chang and Ricardo Lopez. The Korean legend stopped Ohashi in five rounds in 1986 (the Japanese slugger's seventh pro bout) and in eight rounds two years later in WBC 108-pound title defenses. The Mexican maestro stopped Ohashi in five rounds in 1990, lifting the WBC 105-pound title to kick off his record-setting strawweight reign.

Ohashi retired in 1993, opened his own gym and began promoting in 2001. Three-division titleholder Akira Yaegashi and former 115-pound beltholder Katsushige Kawashima are among the standouts Ohashi developed before he brought up the Inoue brothers – Naoya and Takuma – and former WBO bantamweight titlist Yoshiki Takei.

Since his pro debut 13 years ago, Inoue (31-0, 27 KOs) has evolved from the wunderkind of Japanese boxing to the most decorated boxer the nation has ever produced. The 32-year-old boxer-puncher won world titles at junior flyweight (in his sixth pro bout) and junior bantamweight (eighth pro bout) before earning undisputed champion status at bantamweight and junior featherweight, where he currently reigns.

Along the way, "The Monster" defeated the best of four divisions, including Ryoichi Taguchi, Omar Narvaez, Juan Carlos Payano, Emmanuel Rodriguez, Nonito Donaire (twice), Jason Moloney, Paul Butler, Stephen Fulton, Marlon Tapales, Luis Nery and Murodjon Akhmadaliev. He is the first Japanese boxer to star solo on a Ring Magazine cover and the first to reach the top of The Ring's pound-for-pound rankings.

The superstar is set to headline his first event in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on December 27 when he defends his 122-pound belts against Alan Picasso. Fellow pound-for-pound-ranked countryman Junto Nakatani makes his junior featherweight debut in the co-featured bout. If both win, as expected, the two could clash in the biggest all-Japanese showdown ever in 2026, and Ohashi would be the lead promoter.

There are multiple paths linking the Japanese warriors, whose primes are separated by 35 years, but we found this five-boxer Fightline.

Can you find a faster route?

If so, or if you have another Fightline you'd like to submit, send it to comeoutwriting@gmail.com. And remember, some fighters can be linked on paper by jumping forward and backward in time, but to be a true lineage, the fights must come in chronological order. RING

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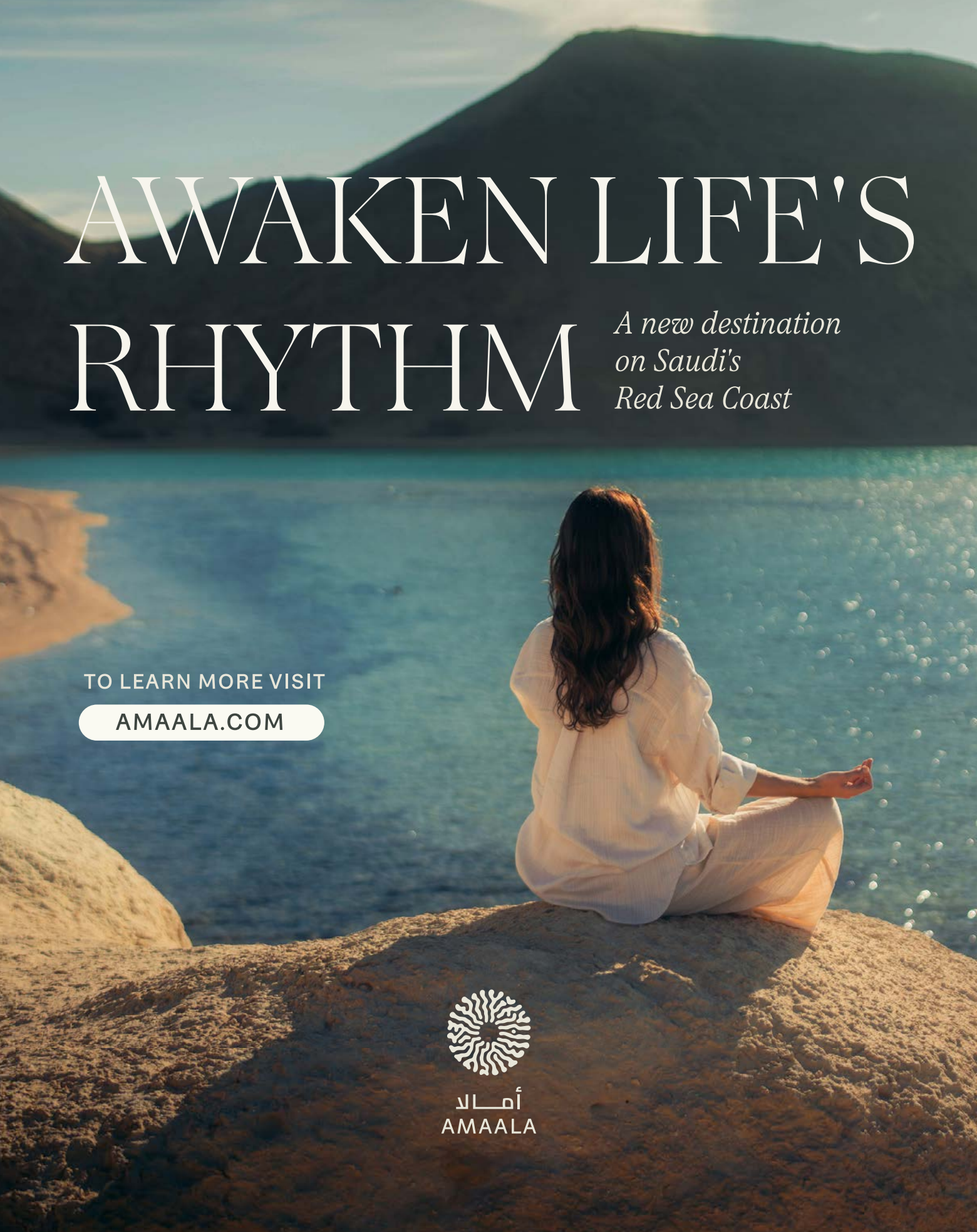
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